

LHASA AT LAST

J. MacDonald Oxley

L'HASA AT LAST



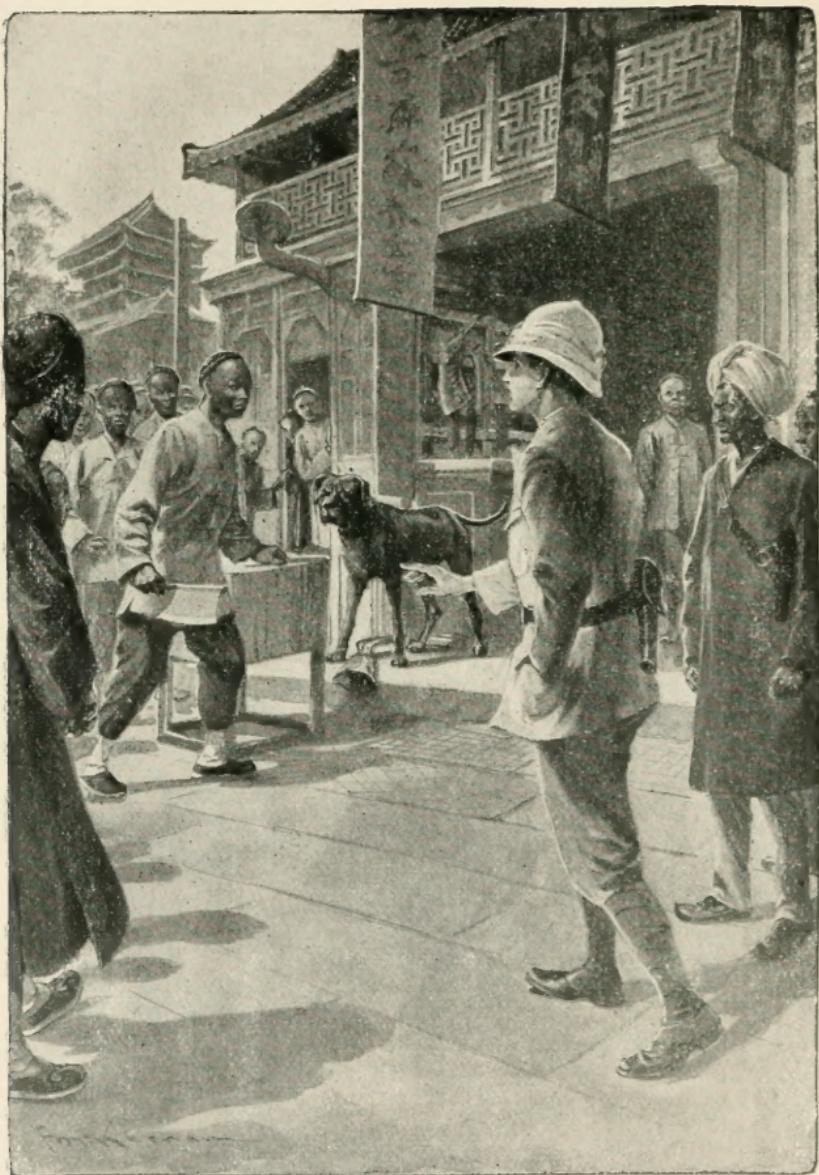
"Well done, old dog, we've won the brush!"

L'Hasa at Last]

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“ ‘ Let the dog alone ; I’ll pay for the meat.’ ”

(Page 227.)

L’Hasa at Last

[Frontispiece

L'HASA AT LAST

BY

J. MACDONALD OXLEY

AUTHOR OF 'ON THE WORLD'S ROOF,' 'IN THE SWING OF THE SEA,'
'THE HERO OF START POINT,' ETC.

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NOTE

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*The Author desires to acknowledge
his special obligation in the preparation of
this story to the graphic record of the adventures of
the Abbé Huc, and his companion, Abbé Gabet, who would
appear to have been not only the first, but also the
last Europeans to succeed in making their way
into the Forbidden City of Tibet*

J. M. O.

September 1, 1900

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L'HASA AT LAST

CHAPTER I

GETTING UNDER WAY

UNDAUNTED by the failure of his first endeavour to penetrate to the mysterious capital of Tibet, Colonel Stannard had not long returned to his post in the Forestry Department of the Indian Service before he began to lay plans for another attempt.

This time he took Kent fully into his confidence, and many an hour did they spend in consultation over the route, his son's questions often reminding him of what he might have overlooked, even though the boy's suggestions were rarely worth heeding.

Fully satisfied of the impracticability of finding any open door to Tibet on the southern border, Colonel Stannard decided to essay an entry from the north, and accordingly proceeded to obtain all the information he could concerning the way through China.

In this quest fortune singularly favoured him. He had a large acquaintance among the natives of India, owing in part to his genial, magnetic manner and in part to his mastery of their language.

Through one of these friends he learned of a rather remarkable individual, who claimed to have accomplished the journey to L'hasa by the route through China. Colonel Stannard at once set himself to bringing about a meeting with this man, and after no little difficulty succeeded.

Sarat Chandra Das proved to be a person quite out of the ordinary. A scion of the Indian aristocracy, he had been of altogether too vigorous and adventurous a spirit to be content with a life of luxury and laziness as a pensioner of the British crown. He had, therefore, enlisted in what might be called the outside service of the government, and had done excellent work as an explorer and pioneer among the little-known tribes and districts to the north, where no European's life would have been safe for a day.

Having thus established his worth and fidelity, he had finally been entrusted with the difficult and dangerous commission of finding his way to the jealously-guarded capital of the lamas. Through a thousand perils and privations he had pushed on across the dreadful Tibetan deserts, and eventually, more dead than alive, reached L'hasa, where he had been permitted to remain for nearly a year, thanks to his skill and address in ingratiating himself with the lamas and winning their confidence.

His way to L'hasa had been from the north of India, but he returned through China by means of one of the caravans that occasionally make the long and arduous journey between the Tibetan and the Chinese capitals. He was, therefore, familiar with

the whole country and its various peoples, and there were few questions that Colonel Stannard asked to which he could not furnish a reply.

Kent was particularly fascinated by Sarat Chandra Das. He thought him the most wonderful man he had ever met, and, like Desdemona listening to Othello, would "devour up his discourse" as he spoke in his soft, smooth voice :

Of moving accidents by flood and field,
. . . of antres vast and deserts idle,
Rough quarries, rocks, and hills whose heads touch heaven,

until he came also to love him for the dangers he had passed. "Won't he come with us too?" he demanded eagerly of his father. "He knows everything about the country and the people and he could help us so much."

This same idea had occurred to Colonel Stannard, but on broaching it to the Hindu, he was at once met with a courteous yet decided refusal.

One journey to L'hasa in a lifetime was quite enough, even for so adventurous a spirit. Indeed, he did all in his power to dissuade Colonel Stannard from attempting it himself, and not until he was fully persuaded of the Englishman's determination to go, did he yield up freely the stores of information he possessed.

As the result of many and prolonged consultations with Sarat Chandra Das, the colonel's plans were ultimately perfected, and active preparations for their carrying out were entered upon.

In order that he might not be cramped for time, he asked for a whole year's leave of absence, which was readily obtained in view of the purpose to which it was to be applied. Among his friends at Simla, his enterprise was generally regarded as a hair-brained scheme out of which he should be reasoned, if possible.

"Of course you never expect to see India again," said Major Montague, who, while ready enough to endure any hardship that might come in the way of military duty, utterly failed to understand why one should voluntarily seek it for the sake of mere geographical knowledge. "You're bound to leave your bones on one of those beastly barrens of which Tibet consists. Why can't you be sensible and give the thing up? Supposing you do get to L'hasa and back again by some miracle, how much better off will you be?"

Colonel Stannard laughed good-humouredly. "Not very much, maybe, unless the government should see fit to give me a handsome pension for the performance, which is not at all likely," he responded. "But, after all, why should I not go? The thing must be done by somebody. That provoking place has to be visited. We can't let those stubborn fellows have their own way about it much longer, and since it's not just expedient to dispatch an armed expedition to fight its way to L'hasa, then the only thing is to make the attempt by private enterprise. Now I am perfectly free. I have no responsibilities save my boy, and he is going with me, for he won't listen to

staying behind, so that whatever happens to one will happen to both of us. You must admit, therefore, that I have as good a right as the next man to try my hand."

"Oh, well," returned the major, "it's very evident there's no reasoning with you. Your blood will be on your head, if you come to grief. And so you really mean to take your boy along, eh?"

"Yes," answered Colonel Stannard; "it would simply break his heart if I didn't. He was with me the first time, you know, and he came through everything quite as well as I did myself."

"He certainly is a sturdy fellow," said the major with an admiring glance at Kent, who stood a little way from them engaged in conversation with a young officer.

"And as steady and reliable as he is sturdy," added Colonel Stannard warmly. "A better boy I could not wish to have, and he'll be capital company for me on the journey."

Kent was now nearly eighteen years of age and the very picture of youthful vigour. A two years' residence in India had browned his face until he might almost have passed for a Eurasian, had not the light curly hair and clear blue eyes bespoken his British blood.

His height fell but an inch short of six feet, and an ardent devotion to the forms of sport and athletic exercises popular in India had trained and developed every muscle and sinew until he might justly claim to be "as hard as nails" and equal to anything that

was likely to befall him. He could play a dashing game of polo, make a good showing in tennis or cricket, shoot straight with either rifle or revolver, and handle a spear in a very creditable manner. Nor had his body been cultivated at the expense of his brains. Thanks to the interest taken by his father in his intellectual development, he was exceedingly well informed and gave great promise of making a good place for himself in the world when the time came.

The relation existing between father and son was that of perfect mutual understanding and profound affection. They were all in all to each other in a certain sense, and needed no other society so long as they were together.

Still in the prime of life Colonel Stannard was a splendid specimen of manhood. His tall, commanding figure, handsome countenance, with his habitually grave though kindly expression, keen, gray eyes, that were so honest in themselves and seemed to demand the same honesty from others, his deep, steady voice, in which the tone of command was ever latent, these characteristics combined to make him a man who rarely failed to carry through to a successful issue whatever he undertook.

As a matter of course the two natives who had served them so loyally on their first expedition would accompany them this time.

Chunna Lal, the stalwart Sikh, and Bahadur Kan-war, the sturdy little Goorkha, were both quite as eager for the undertaking as the Stannards them-

selves. Their life had been sadly devoid of exciting incident since their return from the little war with the Kaniutis, and they were pining for fresh adventures.

"And how about dear old Hercules?" Kent eagerly inquired. "We won't go without him, will we?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," answered Colonel Stannard doubtfully. "It will be rather difficult getting him to Peking I'm afraid."

"But we must manage it somehow," cried Kent, with a touch of his father's own imperiousness in his tone. "I simply can't go without him; and then, just think how useful he will be as a watch-dog when we're camping out, as we'll have to do so much of the time, I suppose."

"Well, well, we'll see about it," responded the father good-humouredly. "There is no doubt he'll pay his way right enough if we do take him along."

In the end it was decided to take the big Tibetan mastiff, and he was accordingly brought from his mountain home where he had been sojourning in much comfort.

He manifested huge delight at seeing Kent again, and gave a more composed greeting to the others. He seemed in splendid condition, and Kent made for him a fine strong collar, with a broad silver plate bearing his young master's name, that became him greatly.

It was early in the year when the little party left Calcutta on the long sea-trip around the Gulf of

Pechili. They were on a comfortable steamer that would call at a number of ports *en route*, and Kent anticipated considerable pleasure in thus seeing new places and people.

Steaming out into the broad Bay of Bengal they were soon tossing and tumbling on its troubled bosom in a way that did not bother Colonel Stannard or Kent in the least, for they had both won the freedom of the seas ere this.

But their servants were by no means so fortunate. Neither the Sikh nor the Goorkha, who shall henceforth be called by the nicknames Kent had given them, to wit, Champ and Bunty, had ever been out of sight of land before, and their sufferings from seasickness for the first few days were very pitiful. Champ was quite convinced that his end had come. He lost all hope of recovery from the prostrating malady that was so strange to him, and he gave Colonel Stannard many messages for his people whom he never expected to see again.

Bunty, although equally ill, took the matter more phlegmatically, as was his wont. His stubborn nature refused to yield altogether to the persecution of Neptune, and curling himself up in a heap on the deck he hardly moved or spoke until the sickness passed away, and he had gained his sea-legs for good.

Passing by the Andaman and Nicobar Islands the steamer entered the Straits of Malacca and the talk naturally turned to the doings of the Malay pirates, of whose atrocities Captain Malcomson had many bloodcurdling stories to tell. They had been very

quiet of late, thanks to the persistent patrolling of British gunboats, but they were liable to break out again at any time.

Of this those on board the steamer presently received startling proof, for late one afternoon the captain, who was on the bridge sweeping the sea with his glass, suddenly ordered the course of his vessel to be changed. "There's some mischief going on there, sure as I live," he exclaimed, pointing northward toward the Malay Peninsula.

CHAPTER II

AN EXPERIENCE WITH PIRATES

ALL eyes were at once turned in the direction indicated by the captain, but it was some time before anything could be clearly descried without the aid of a glass.

Then it became evident that his suspicions of mischief were only too well founded, for off a point of land, in such a position as to bespeak stranding, lay a fine barque, and clinging to it like leeches a number of *proas* swarming with Malays.

“The yellow rascals are clearing out the ship,” exclaimed Captain Malcomson, as he sent the signal to the engine-room for full speed ahead. “God help the crew; they must be all done for before this.”

Steaming straight for the stranded ship the steamer tore through the water at splendid speed, but, swift as were her movements, the pirates were quicker.

No sooner did she change her course than they took the alarm, and ere half the distance separating the two vessels had been covered, they were swarming back into their *proas*, and setting out for shore with all possible speed.

"Confound them! they'll get away with all their plunder," growled the captain savagely. "I wish to heaven I could put a volley into them."

The excitement on board the steamer became intense. Every passenger was on deck gazing at the ill-starred vessel, and many of the men had already gotten out their arms, as if they expected to have a brush with the pirates on their own account.

Kent could hardly restrain himself. Although he knew nothing of the ship which had been looted by the scoundrels, his heart burned with the desire for condign punishment upon them, and he was quite ready to take part in any movement for that purpose.

"Shall we follow them ashore?" he eagerly asked his father, "and make them give up what they've stolen?"

"I'm sure I don't know," replied Colonel Stannard; "that depends upon our captain. I shall certainly be glad to co-operate with him if he attempts anything of the kind."

By the time the steamer drew near enough to the barque for the boats to be lowered there was not a pirate within gunshot; but many of them could be seen on the shore gesticulating and shouting in evident anger at having been disturbed in their nefarious business.

Colonel Stannard and Kent were in the first boat that boarded the barque, and when they reached the deck their eyes were met with a sight that turned Kent faint, and extorted a groan of horror even from the veteran soldier.

The unfortunate vessel was an American, sailing from San Francisco to Calcutta with a valuable cargo of manufactured goods, and her brave crew had evidently made a gallant though unsuccessful defence.

The smooth, white deck was stained with blood, and strewn with bodies, both white and brown, in horrible confusion, for so hurried had been the flight of the pirates that they had made no effort to carry off their own dead, preferring to burden themselves with plunder.

"The villains seem to have left not a soul alive," said Colonel Stannard, after a searching glance around. "Let us have a look into the cabin."

Followed by Kent he went into the cabin, which was large and handsomely furnished. Here too there had evidently been a fierce struggle. The things were all thrown about, and prostrate on the floor, bathed in their own blood, lay two of the pirates, their hands still grasping gory *krises*.

"Dreadful work this, eh, Kent?" said the colonel, his grave countenance revealing how deeply he felt for the ill-fated ship's company. "These yellow fiends must be taken in hand by the British government and cleared off the earth if they don't give up their deviltry."

Kent was too deeply moved to say anything. Profound sympathy for the Americans, and fierce passion for vengeance on the marauders possessed him, and he felt as though he would have been quite ready to put the whole lot of them to death by his own hand if that were possible. Beyond the main

cabin was a smaller one, into which Kent made his way, scarce knowing just what he was doing, and, the passage being rather dark, he almost fell over a body that was stretched across it.

As he recovered his balance a groan from the prostrate form so startled him as well-nigh to upset him again, and he dashed back to where his father was, crying :

“ There’s some one alive in there ! Come and see who it is ! ”

On investigation it proved to be the captain of the barque, seriously, but not mortally wounded, and when he was able to speak, he explained that he had been endeavouring to save his wife, who occupied the inner cabin, from the pirates, but had been struck down in the attempt.

“ And now those devils have carried her off with them,” he groaned, “ and God only knows what they will do to her ! ”

This news affected his hearers deeply, and stirred within them the generous resolution to rescue the unhappy woman, if this could possibly be accomplished.

“ We cannot leave her in their hands without at least making an effort to release her,” said Colonel Stannard, in his decisive way. “ Captain Malcomson, what do you think can be done ? ”

The problem was certainly a difficult one to settle. They were not strong enough as to either numbers or arms to attack the pirates in force, and even if they should do so with success, they might not accomplish

their object, as the wily rascals would, no doubt, retire to the interior, taking their captive with them.

Clearly it was a case for diplomacy and negotiation, not for redress at the muzzle of the gun.

But how were the negotiations to be conducted, and who was to be the medium of communication?

Upon this vital question an earnest, though hurried, consultation was held upon the gory deck, with the result that it was decided Colonel Stannard should undertake the dangerous and delicate task, a Malay fireman from the steamer going with him as interpreter.

Kent pleaded hard to be allowed to accompany his father, but the colonel would not consent.

"No, no, my boy," he said, laying his hand affectionately on his shoulder. "There's no telling what diabolical treachery these ruffians may attempt, and if you were with me I might be too anxious on your account to properly carry out what I've got to do."

And so, to his great disappointment, Kent was fain to watch from the steamer, through a telescope, his father's perilous mission.

With a boat's crew of six stalwart sailors, all well armed, and the Malay, who did not by any means relish the job, but was compelled by Captain Malcomson to go, Colonel Stannard set off, followed by the prayers and good wishes of his fellow-passengers and the passionate appeal of Captain Andrews:

"Do your best to save my wife, colonel. I'll give everything I own in the world to get her back alive."

It was a full mile to the shore, and while the boat was making its way thither, the pirates could be seen clustering on the beach and evidently much excited at the approach of the boat.

Kent had got on the bridge of the steamer, and with a good glass, kindly loaned him by the captain, commanded a clear view of the whole proceedings, which he breathlessly described to those who had only their own eyes to help them:

“The boat’s just near shore now and it’s stopped. Father is standing up in the bow and waving his arm to the pirates, and they’re coming close down to the water’s edge. They must be talking now, for the Malay is in the bow beside father, and the pirates have stopped jumping about and seem to be listening. Wouldn’t I like to know just what they’re saying! Hello! What’s up now? They’ve gone up the beach and have gathered together by the trees. They must be having a consultation, and they’re getting very much excited about it too. Ah, they’ve broken up the meeting and are coming back toward the boat. I do hope father won’t land, for they look awfully fierce and quite ready to kill anybody.

“Now they’re talking again with father, and this time they seem to be better pleased with what he says. What’s that?” And Kent trembled so with excitement that he could hardly hold his glass to his eyes. “Why, they’re bringing a woman down from the trees! It must be Captain Andrews’ wife. Hurrah! they’re going to give her up.”

At this announcement a glad cheer went up from

the deck of the steamer, and the passengers rejoiced with one another as though the imperilled woman had belonged to them, while Captain Andrews, who, having had his wounds attended to by the steamer's doctor, was lying in a steamer chair, a prey to the keenest anxiety, sprang to his feet crying, "Thank God ! Thank God !" and fell back in a faint.

But the rejoicings proved premature, for although the pirates permitted Mrs. Andrews to be seen, they did not surrender her, and presently, to the bewilderment and dismay of those on board the steamer, the boat turned about and came back without having accomplished its purpose.

"Why, what can it mean?" cried Kent in amazement. "They're leaving the captain's wife behind !"

When Colonel Stannard returned to the steamer, he was overwhelmed with excited inquiries, which, however, he made no attempt to answer until he had conferred both with Captain Malcomson and with Captain Andrews, who by this time had regained consciousness. What he had to report was that the pirates would not surrender Mrs. Andrews except upon payment of a heavy ransom, which must first be put in their hands.

Immediately on this becoming known, offers of subscription poured in from the passengers. Some gave gold, others jewelry, and others goods that might appeal to the pirates' cupidity, and in a very few minutes a ransom worthy of a princess was at Colonel Stannard's command.



"Colonel Stannard held up to their eyes the gold and trinkets
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When he was ready to return, Kent again asked to accompany him, and this time his father consented, saying:

"Very well, come along; they're not likely to act ugly now."

Radiant with joy, Kent sprang into the boat, which at once set off for the shore.

When within fifty yards of the beach, Colonel Stannard stopped the boat, and, speaking through the interpreter, invited the pirates to send out two of their leaders to see the ransom which he bore.

After a little talking together, this request was obeyed, and a light wooden canoe containing four men came toward the boat. Halting half-a-dozen yards off, for they evidently feared some kind of a trap, the pirates asked that the ransom should be exhibited.

Colonel Stannard accordingly held up to their eyes the gold and trinkets and goods which had been brought as the price of Mrs. Andrews' release. Their black eyes glistened and their yellow features contorted with cupidity at the sight of these treasures, and they fell to chattering eagerly with one another.

"What are they saying?" demanded Colonel Stannard of the interpreter impatiently, for he was anxious to get done with the business.

"I cannot understand," answered the Malay; "they speak not loud enough."

"What horrid-looking scoundrels they are!" exclaimed Kent half under his breath as he watched the pirates closely. "God help the poor woman

if we don't succeed in getting her out of their clutches."

After consulting for some minutes, the pirates, without vouchsafing any response to Colonel Stan-nard, suddenly turned the canoe about and paddled swiftly ashore.

CHAPTER III

A TIMELY CHAMPION

“CONFFOUND them! What are they about?” exclaimed Colonel Stannard angrily, when the pirates thus unceremoniously went off.

“Perhaps they’ve gone to report to the others,” Kent suggested, “and will soon come back again.”

“You may be right, my boy,” responded the colonel in an easier tone; and turning to the interpreter, he inquired if that was what this action probably meant.

“It is so,” was the Malay’s reply. “They have gone to tell what you bring and they will return soon.”

With bated breath the Stannards watched the proceedings on the beach. The moment the envoys landed they were surrounded by a gesticulating crowd, every member of which seemed to be doing his best to talk louder than the next man. The noise and confusion continued for a length of time that tried Colonel Stannard’s patience to the utmost, but at last considerably subsided, and presently, to his vast

relief, he saw the captain's wife being led down from the forest in which she had been concealed.

"Hurrah, they're going to give her up!" cried Kent, standing in the bow and waving his handkerchief to Mrs. Andrews by way of greeting and congratulation.

Nor was he mistaken in his reading of the situation. The report of their representatives had been deemed satisfactory by the pirates, and they were eager to get possession of the ransom awaiting them in the steamer's boat.

Hurrying the poor woman along, with small consideration for the state of weakness in which she was after the awful experiences she had undergone, they roughly shoved her into their canoe and paddled out to the boat.

But not until every item of ransom had been handed over would they surrender their captive, and when at last her transfer from the canoe to the boat had been effected, her remaining strength gave way, and murmuring, in a scarce audible voice, "God be thanked!" she fell fainting into Colonel Stannard's arms.

Laying her tenderly in the stern-sheets, the colonel called out, "Row hard for the steamer now, my good fellows;" and the sailors, their honest countenances beaming with gladness at the success of their mission, bent to their oars with such vigour that their boat fairly tore through the water.

Rousing was the reception given Colonel Stannard on his return. The passengers crowded about him and Mrs. Andrews, testifying their joy in every pos-

sible way, until, at last, Captain Malcomson was fain to command them to stand aside in order that the husband and wife, thus happily reunited, might rejoice with one another unhindered.

As there was nothing more to be done for the barque, the steamer at once resumed her course, leaving the punishment of the pirates to other hands more competent to inflict it.

At the first opportunity, Kent got from Captain Andrews the whole story of what had happened. His vessel was the *Martha Washington*, and she had struck hard upon an unknown rock while tacking through the strait. Every effort to get her afloat having proved futile, and knowing the danger of pirates, he had promptly made preparations against attack from them.

“The yellow devils did not show up until the next morning,” he went on, the horror of what he had to tell showing on his countenance as he spoke, “and then they came in swarms like mosquitoes. We were pretty well armed with guns and cutlasses and revolvers, but they were ten to our one, at least, and for every scoundrel we knocked over, three others took his place as quick as wink. My men fought like wild cats, the poor chaps, but it was all no use. The yellow skins cut them down one after another until I was the only one left, and then I made for my wife’s cabin to try and defend her to the last. There they nearly did for me, as you know, and but for your steamer happening along so providentially, I’d have died of my wounds and my poor wife have been

left in the hands of these devils. Well, thank God, you saved our lives ; but I've lost everything I have in the world, and I'll have to begin all over again."

Kent's sympathy with the captain in his misfortunes was very sincere, but he could do nothing for him save show him how deeply he felt, which led to their becoming great friends, and many a stirring sea yarn did he hear from the veteran mariner as the steamer ploughed her way on to Singapore. This was the first port of call on the voyage, and the passengers, after being so long confined on board, were glad to get ashore again.

Colonel Stannard, taking Kent with him, at once called upon the governor, who occupied a handsome residence on a commanding site, and was cordially received by Sir Herbert Wallis, who forthwith proceeded to treat them with true British hospitality.

They must needs remain to lunch, and then, after the heat of the day had passed, they would visit the botanical and zoological gardens, which were the boast of the place. This programme suited Kent perfectly, and leaving his father to discuss affairs of State with the governor, he roamed about the palace grounds, thoroughly enjoying the beauty about him.

Having explored the place pretty thoroughly, he strolled out upon the road leading to the city, and, without thinking just what he was doing, kept on until he came to an outskirt of the city occupied entirely by Malays. The affair of the American barque had caused him to regard these people with intense aversion.

"They all look like pirates," he said to himself, as

he observed the men lounging about the doors of their primitive dwellings, their pinched features, yellow skins, and crafty, evasive eyes being certainly the reverse of prepossessing. "I believe any one of them wouldn't hesitate to murder and rob me if he got a good chance."

Not caring to continue his walk in that direction, he had begun to retrace his steps, when suddenly there arose a strange and startling chorus of cries of warning and shrieks of terror that made his heart stop beating for the moment. At first he could not determine exactly whence the uproar proceeded, but an instant later it was clear enough, as, running down the street behind him, came a figure whose appearance and actions certainly were appalling enough to justify the panic.

It was that of a big Malay, whose staggering gait, distorted features, sunken eyes, and frothing lips showed him to be in the delirium of intoxication produced by hemp. In each hand he held a *kris*, and both already dripped with blood. "*Amok! Amok!*" he cried in a horrible, hoarse voice; and as he ran on blunderingly, yet resolutely, he struck right and left at everybody within reach of his gory weapons.

For a moment Kent stood rooted to the ground with astonishment and fear. He had often heard of the dreadful Malay performance of running *amok*, but had never come face to face with it before. And now, when the first paralyzing fright had passed, his first impulse was to take refuge in precipitate flight.

But just then he noticed, playing in the dust of the road, right in the path of the murdering maniac, a pretty child, scarce three years old, upon whose ears the cries of warning had fallen unheeded. In the general panic she had been forgotten, and as surely as she remained there would fall an innocent victim to the bloody *kris*.

Kent was unarmed save for a stout Malacca cane which he had bought that very morning, and realizing the inadequacy of this, as compared with the Malay's weapon, he exclaimed regretfully :

“ If I only had my revolver now I'd put a stop to that ruffian.”

Yet even though he was thus poorly armed, the generous impulse to protect the little girl rose superior to the instinct of self-preservation, and murmuring, “ I must stand by her, I can't see her killed,” he grasped his stick firmly and placed himself between her and the advancing death.

The maddened Malay seemed not to lift his eyes from the ground as he came on with outstretched, reeking steel, and Kent bethought himself how hunters evaded the charge of the wild buffalo by waiting until they were almost upon them and then darting to one side. So he stood his ground until the Malay was within a yard of him, and then, springing suddenly to the right, he brought his stick down with all his strength upon the fellow's head, crying, “ Take that, you monster ! ”

The blow was admirably aimed and fell just where it would be most effective, namely, on the back of the

man's head, at the base of the brain. Down he went in the dust like a log, and, to make sure work, Kent struck him once more as he lay prostrate. Then, stooping down, he snatched the *krises* from his hands and flung them away as far as he could.

"There now," he exclaimed, quite out of breath with excitement and exertion, "that will stop your mischief."

While this was going on, the child, at last taking alarm, had fled, screaming, homeward, and there being nothing further for Kent to do, he thought it well to get away from the place himself with all possible speed. With one parting look, therefore, at the still senseless Malay, he set off for the governor's at a rapid pace, not drawing breath until he had left the scene of his exploit a good way behind.

On relating his morning's adventure, Sir Herbert Wallis looked very grave, saying :

"You were in even greater danger than you thought, my boy, and it is a great mercy you escaped with your life, since those Malays think that a person running *amok* is in a kind of holy frenzy, and they resent any interference with them on the part of Europeans, so that you showed great wisdom in getting away as soon as possible. But you acted nobly anyway, Kent, even if one little yellow-skin more or less may seem of small consequence."

Colonel Stannard was very proud of his son's brave deed.

"You showed yourself a true Stannard that time," he said, in a voice that trembled with emotion.

"May you never fail to espouse the cause of the weak and the wronged. That's the kind of life that's best worth living."

After a sumptuous lunch and the customary *siesta*, they set out in the cool of the afternoon to do the Lion City.

Kent was delighted with what he saw. The long rows of splendid buildings ; the busy, bustling streets and markets ; the broad river, crowded with shipping from every quarter of the globe ; and the polyglot multitude of Chinese, Japanese, Siamese, Javanese, Singalese, Malays, Hindus, Parsees, Tamils, Arabs, Europeans, and representatives of every race, made up a panorama of wonderful interest through which they passed, riding luxuriously in an elegant carriage.

Having driven about the city, they then visited the Raffles Museum, called after Sir Stamford Raffles, the wise, far-seeing founder of Singapore, where they found a wonderful wealth of interesting objects. Then came the beautiful botanical gardens, and so back to the palace for dinner, and afterward a delightful evening of music and other entertainment.

Through it all Sir Herbert Wallis paid Kent special attention, for not only the boy's prepossessing appearance and bearing, but his daring rescue of the Malay child had greatly impressed him.

"You have reason to be proud of your son, Colonel Stannard," he said, as he was parting with his guests, Kent being out of earshot. "He does you credit in every way. I wonder you would risk taking him with you on this wild expedition of yours."

"Oh, you see, there are only the two of us in the world," responded the colonel, "and we stand or fall together. He would not listen to remaining behind, and so he had to come. We may not reach L'hasa, but I have no apprehension as to our not returning with whole skins. I am convinced that the perils and hardships of the journey have been greatly exaggerated."

CHAPTER IV

IN THE TOILS OF A TYPHOON

LEAVING Singapore with regret, as they would gladly have prolonged their stay in that prosperous and brilliant centre of commerce, they steamed up the South China Sea, past the great peninsula of Siam, which Kent was sorry they were not to visit, and thence onward to another stronghold of British arms and business.

A blue, blue sea, a barren brown coast, mountains of burnt rock rising clear from the exquisite sapphire water, and then, rounding a bold point, the good steamer swept into the splendid amphitheatre of Hong Kong harbour, the watery arena thronged with merchantmen and men-of-war of all nations.

No sooner had the steamer anchored than she was surrounded by a perfect cloud of *sampans*, each "manned" by a shrill-voiced woman who, Kent was informed by the captain, sculled, steered, cooked, spanked her children, drove her bargains, and squabbled with her sister boat-woman, just as if

she had no husband to help her along in the world.

These women amused him greatly by their noisy endeavours to secure patronage, and he said to his father :

“ It won’t be easy to pick one out of that crowd when we want to go ashore, will it? They look as if they’d tear one another to pieces if they could.”

“ Oh, we sha’n’t trust ourselves to one of those crazy craft,” answered the colonel. “ We’ll go in one of the launches,” for besides the *sampans* several steam launches had come out to take passengers ashore. Accordingly they took their places on one of these, and were swiftly transported ashore.

They found the Gibraltar of the East, as it is quite appropriately called, an imposing and beautiful city. Situated on a deep slope of the mountain, it rose from the sea in terrace above terrace, almost to the summit of the lofty peak. At first glance the snow-white houses seemed to be slipping down the bold hillside, and spreading out along the water’s edge, where they extended for over three miles. But they were all solidly anchored to the rock and surrounded with a wealth of foliage which was entirely due to human agency.

The winding curves of the Bowen and Kennedy viaducts encircled the mountain, and looking up at them, Kent remarked sagely :

“ Those roads must have cost a mint of money. What a great people we are, to be sure! When

we go about anything we do it on such a grand scale."

But it was at night that Hong Kong presented the most striking picture. Then the harbour sparkled with the myriad lights on the vessels, and shone with glittering trails of phosphorescence as the boats and *sampans* shot hither and thither, the broad streets blazed with electricity, and gliding up and down the steep slope of the peak, the brightly-lit cable cars seemed like fiery beads moving on an invisible cord. Of course they did not fail to visit the vast fortifications which were being continually strengthened, and the arsenals, barracks, and docks whereby Hong Kong was made an impregnable citadel of British power in Asia.

The sights and sounds as they drove along the Queen's Road and the Praya were certainly bewildering in their novelty and variety, and Kent's eyes and tongue were kept busy observing everything and asking questions of his father. Here a dark-skinned ayah, clothed in spotless white, slipped softly down a long stairway, casting a sly side glance at the stalwart Sikh policeman standing statuesquely by the corner ; there a professional mender with owlish glasses, bent over her basket of rags, darning and patching ; a little farther on a barber had dropped his pole and boxes, and began to operate upon a customer in the open street as coolly as if in the retirement of a room ; pigtailed youngsters playing a sort of shuttlecock with their feet got in everybody's way ; itinerant pedlars split one's ears with their piercing yells ; fire-crackers

sputtered and banged their superstitious appeals to joss, and from the harbour came the boom of naval salutes for some arriving man-of-war, or for the governor paying ship visits ; while swarming everywhere in ceaseless movement was a motley crowd of Jews, Turks, Mohammedans, Europeans, and representatives of all the races of the far East.

Colonel Stannard found some friends at Hong Kong, one of them being a wealthy merchant, Mr. Henshaw, who dwelt in one of the palaces on the peak, and forthwith invited him and Kent to a dinner-party he was giving that evening. It was a sumptuous entertainment, and Kent highly enjoyed the splendour of the surroundings and the luxurious elegance of the feast. After dinner they had an exhibition of Japanese jugglery and balancing feats that surpassed anything he had ever seen before, and he amused his father by exclaiming in a tone of such intense earnestness :

“ How I wish I could do some of those things ! Wouldn’t I create a sensation with them when we go back to England ? ”

“ Ah, Kent, my boy,” replied the colonel smilingly, “ to perform such feats as those you should have begun to learn before you were out of short frocks ; and even then, I doubt if our stiff, awkward bodies could ever become as supple and active as do these india-rubber Japs.”

On their way back to the city they had a rather peculiar experience. Something went wrong with the machinery of the cable system, and the car came

to a full stop in the middle of a long trestle-work where it was impracticable for any of the passengers to get out.

They consequently had to keep their places until the car should start again. Happily they were nearly all the guests of Mr. Henshaw and in the best of humours, so they laughingly resigned themselves to the situation, and with stories, songs, and choruses whiled away the time until after a long delay the car once more got in motion, landing them at the foot of the peak just as dawn was breaking in the east.

The weather outlook was not very promising as they left Hong Kong, but the steamer ran by a schedule to which her captain sought to adhere as closely as possible, and any further delay could not be considered.

"I'm afraid we're in for squalls, Kent," said Colonel Stannard, sweeping sky and sea with a keen glance as they left the harbour behind and passed into the open sea. "Let us hope it won't be more than an ordinary gale, and not one of those terrible typhoons for which these waters are so notorious."

"But would it matter much to such a big, powerful steamer as this?" asked Kent, in a tone of surprise. "This ship surely ought to be able to stand anything."

"It is very evident you know nothing about typhoons, my son," replied the colonel, with an indulgent smile. "Why, the worst gale you've been through on your way to and from England is not to be compared to a genuine typhoon. But I hope

you'll only have to take my word for it, and not be called upon to see the difference for yourself."

As the day declined, however, the rapid lowering of the glass, the ominous darkening of the sky, and the deep, sullen muttering of the wind betokened the sure approach of the dreaded danger.

The captain of the steamer gave command for every preparation to be made to meet it. The hatches were fastened down, the decks cleared of everything that could not be securely lashed, and the passengers directed to keep below in the cabins.

The night that followed was one never to be forgotten. The wind began to blow hard at sunset, and grew in violence every hour until by midnight it seemed as if the very limit of its power must be reached.

The big steamer pitched and plunged so madly that it was impossible for people to keep their feet, and if they did endeavour to move from one place to another they were fain to crawl on their hands and knees rather than risk being flung headlong if they stood upright.

A wild babel of terrifying noises filled the air—the furious howling of the wind, the agonized groaning of the straining vessel, the frantic exclamations of the affrighted passengers, and the hoarse shouts of the officers and the crew as they performed their perilous duties.

Kent had passed through some pretty rough weather when at sea before, but this went beyond

everything, and he had to confess himself thoroughly alarmed.

There was no sleep on board the steamer that night, and when the gray ghastly morning brought no subsiding of the elemental strife, the poor passengers wondered apprehensively how much longer they could endure it, or their vessel keep afloat.

After breakfast, which the steward had managed to serve in some kind of fashion, Kent became possessed with the idea of going on deck to get a view of the ocean in its wild turmoil which could not be obtained from below.

He said nothing to his father about it, knowing quite well that he would forbid it, but slipped away when the colonel was doing his best to enjoy his morning cigar.

Kent's notion had been to go as far as the cabin door and look out from thence; but when with much difficulty he reached the door he found it so hard to open that he began to think it must be locked.

He struggled with it for a minute and was just about giving up, when suddenly, as the steamer gave a tremendous roll to starboard, the door flew open, and Kent, taken unawares, shot out of it with such force that he could not check himself until he brought up against a stanchion, which happily saved him from going clear overboard. In the return roll of the vessel the door slammed to again, leaving him out on the deck freely exposed to all the fury of the elements.

Now this was not at all what he had counted upon. His cap had been whisked off by the wind ; his coat was only a thin one, through which the driving spray drenched him to the skin, and the flooded deck was so slippery that he dared not take a step upon it.

“ What a perfect fool I was to leave the cabin,” he muttered regretfully. “ Heaven knows how I am to get back there again.”

His position certainly was one of grave peril. Only his hold on the stanchion could save him from being swept away by one of the huge billows that continually broke over the bulwarks, and so fearful was their force that even his strength seemed scarce equal to resisting their furious attacks.

And yet, in spite of the gravity of the situation, he could not help being filled with awe at the solemnity of the scene. The big, powerful steamer was being tossed about by the mountainous waves like a mere chip. They were apparently making sport of her as now they lifted her long, black body high up toward the sombre sky, and then let her drop back again into the dark abyss between the billows while they flung their foaming crests upon her deck, sweeping it from bow to stern. The livid clouds hung so low that it seemed as if the steamer’s topmasts might almost touch them when she rose upon the summit of a wave, and the air was full of flying scud snatched up by the flying wind.

But few seamen were visible, and they did not trust themselves to let go of rope or belaying-pin for an instant. Up on the bridge forward two muffled

figures could be made out. They were evidently the captain and chief mate, uniting their skill and experience for the saving of the steamer.

"I only wish I was up with them," sighed Kent, "but it would be more than my life is worth to try for it."



"Hold fast there, Kent, until I get a rope!"

CHAPTER V

AT THE CHINESE CAPITAL

How long Kent hung on to the stanchion he could not tell, but it seemed like an age before the cabin door again was flung back, and to his inexpressible relief, his father appeared in the opening.

The keen concern expressed in his countenance at sight of Kent showed how fully he understood the boy's danger, and instead of at once darting to his side, he made a trumpet of his hands, and shouted :

" Hold fast there, Kent, until I get a rope."

The wind carried the words away, so that they did not reach Kent ; but he saw that his father was speaking, and he knew that his being helped back to safety would be only a matter of a few minutes.

Colonel Stannard then disappeared, and presently returned with a coil of rope, one end of which, after several unsuccessful casts, fell at Kent's feet.

With a glad heart he grasped it, quickly took a turn of it round his waist, and then letting go of the stanchion, which had stood him in such good stead, he started for the cabin door.

Just at that moment a great body of foaming brine

leaped over the bulwark, and catching him up as though he had no weight at all, whirled him along the deck toward the stern.

"Hold on, for heaven's sake!" shouted Colonel Stannard, bracing himself to withstand the strain.

Well was it for Kent that he had taken the precaution to wind the rope about his waist as well as seize it in his hands, or the sudden severe jerk which came when he had reached its limit would surely have torn it from his grasp.

Happily he did hold on all right, and ere another billow could make the attempt in which the first one had failed, his father drew him inside the cabin door in safety.

"You foolhardy boy!" he exclaimed. "What possessed you to go on deck in such a storm as this? You may be very thankful that you were not carried away to death."

"And so I am, father," responded Kent archly, "and to you for saving me. I just went up to have a look at things, not intending to go outside the cabin door, and the steamer gave a sudden lurch that sent me flying clear across the deck. What an awful sight it is! How much longer is it likely to last?"

"God only knows," replied the colonel, with an anxious sigh. "Let us trust to-day will see the end of it."

The typhoon spent its force during the day, and although the sea ran high for another twenty-four hours, all danger had passed, and the voyage was completed without mishap.

As the staunch steamer, having thus borne herself so bravely, made good speed along the coast of the old mysterious land of far Cathay, every moment of daylight was full of novelty and interest. After sighting the low brown line which marked the outermost edge of the land of the pig-tail, the vessel drew nearer until the trees showed like a mirage upon the still water, and the masts of ships and trails of smoke told of an unseen river winding behind those trees. Clumsy junks with brown-laced sails and huge staring eyes painted at their bows went slowly by, their dirty, fierce-visaged, pig-tailed crews peering out from the litter of bamboo poles and matting. These junks afforded Kent much amusement. In comparison with the steamer, they seemed such a parody on sea-going vessels, and yet, as his father assured him, they could weather severe storms, although they always sought to avoid them by taking shelter in some harbour whenever it was possible to manage it.

The signal station at the mouth of the Yang-tse-Kiang had announced the arrival of the steamer at the "Heavenly Barrier," as the Woosung Bar is euphoniously called, and a number of launches were in waiting to convey the passengers up the river to Shanghai, some thirteen miles distant.

Approached from the river, the commercial capital of North China, and the largest foreign settlement in the East, presented so imposing an appearance that Kent exclaimed as they landed on the long beach and looked up at the massive line of many-storied stone buildings which fronted it :

"Why, father, what a lot of palaces! A great many important people must live here."

The colonel laughed at his son's mistake, which after all was natural enough.

"These are not palaces, Kent," he replied; "they are merely warehouses. The palaces are farther inland, or up the river."

They made the most of their short stay at Shanghai, visiting the British and American compounds, spending an afternoon at the luxurious quarters of the Country Club out on the Bubbling Well Road, where games of tennis and polo were going on, being trundled through the Chinese city on passenger wheelbarrows by sinewy coolies, taking tea at the famous willow-pattern tea-house, and running the gauntlet of the long, narrow streets of china, silk, fur, and other shops, where there were a thousand and one rich and beautiful things to tempt the purse.

From Shanghai the steamer continued her way up through the Yellow Sea, which fortunately happened to be in the best of humours, into the Gulf of Pechili, and so to a final stopping-place at the mouth of the Pei-ho River, where Colonel Stannard and his party left her to go overland to Peking.

Greatly to his surprise, Kent found there was a railway ready to convey them from their landing-place at Ting-ku to Tientsin, and thence on to Peking.

"Why, they are getting quite civilized here, aren't they?" he exclaimed. "How strange it seems going by railway in China."

But he was disgusted when the road ended several miles from the city, and they had to complete their journey on donkey-back.

"Why couldn't they finish the job while they are about it?" he said contemptuously. "The idea of stopping out here instead of going right into the city."

"They would have been glad enough to do it had they been allowed, my boy," answered his father. "But it was hard enough to get as far as they did. The Chinese detest and dread railroads. If they could have their own way there wouldn't be a foot of track in the whole country, and as Peking is so sacred a city in their estimation, the hated thing must not really touch it, but must be kept away at some distance; so that is the reason why we have to ride on donkey-back instead of in a car."

Comfortable quarters having been secured at an excellent hotel in the same street where the foreign legation had their offices, the Stannards settled down for an extended stay at the Chinese capital, as there would be a vast amount of preparation necessary ere they could set out on their adventurous journey.

This suited Kent admirably. The huge city, swarming with strange people and resounding with incessant noise, interested him immensely, and he wanted to see as much of it as possible.

His father's time being fully occupied waiting upon the aggravatingly slow authorities for passes and securing his equipment, he was left a good deal to his own resources. But the time did not hang heavy on his hands.

Accompanied by Bunty, the shrewd, sturdy Goorkha, and guided by a Chinese boy, engaged at the hotel, he went exploring on his own account, while his father, with the stately Sikh as his attendant, confined himself to business.

His first walk was to the Hataman Gate, not far from the legation, where by giving a hundred cash to the guards he was permitted to mount the wall of the city and get a fine view of the different quarters.

There, outspread before him, lay the most wonderful human hive in the world, divided by great walls into concentric rings. Within the first or outer wall was the Chinese city, within that the Tartar city, within that the imperial city, and innermost of all, jealously secluded from the desecrating presence of the feared and hated "foreign devils," lay the purple forbidden city, with the yellow-tiled roofs of the emperor's palace showing above the trees of the park.

The guide was an intelligent fellow, whose pigeon-English Kent could make out pretty well, and he chattered away vigorously about the different sights, seeming to be quite proud of so many places of interest being forbidden the foreigner.

"And why won't they let us see them?" Kent demanded indignantly. "We're not going to do them any harm, I'm sure. They ought to be glad enough to show them to us."

The guide only grinned and made an expressive gesture of disclaimer as to his being in any way responsible for this provoking state of affairs.

"Inglise, Melicans, all body make not go. They

kill him welly queek if they catchee him." And with this not very satisfactory explanation Kent was fain to be content, although his adventurous spirit was strongly appealed to by every glimpse of these guarded palaces and temples.

The Confucian temple, the Hall of Classics, and the immense Examination Hall, where thousands of students gathered every year to strive for rank and honours, were, however, opened to him, and he visited them all.

Fortunately it happened to be the busy season at the latter place, and he had the opportunity of seeing how the great annual examination is conducted. Having had some experience in school examinations in England, he was keenly interested in the Chinese methods, the severity of which seemed to him almost beyond the ability of flesh and blood to bear.

"Just to think," he said to his father, "of being cooped up in that little stone sentry-box all day long, scribbling away for dear life, without a soul to speak to, and having to keep that up day after day for weeks. I'm sure I should go crazy, wouldn't you?"

"I expect I'd find it a little more than I was equal to," answered the colonel smiling. "Only Chinamen could stand it, and many of them break down under the strain."

But the great event of their stay at Peking was the visit to the lamasery.

Colonel Stannard was particularly anxious to accomplish this, because they would have much to do with lamas during the journey they were about to

undertake, and he wanted to see what kind of men they were, having had such varied and conflicting accounts of them.

The "Palace of Everlasting Harmony," as the huge habitation of more than a thousand Mongol and Tibetan monks was euphemistically called, stood at the north-eastern corner of the city, and admittance to it could be obtained only by a liberal expenditure of "cash," the worthy lamas not being willing to be disturbed in their pious meditations unless being well paid for the privilege.

Champ and Bunty were left behind on this occasion, and accompanied only by their guide, Colonel Stannard and Kent presented themselves before the great, grim doors of the lamasery.

A more repellent-looking place could hardly be imagined. Even Kent's doughty heart experienced a chill as he stood before the massive gateway, where they were kept waiting an interminable time while their guide was conducting negotiations for their entrance.

"To judge from outside appearances there might well be inscribed over this doorway, 'All hope abandon, ye who enter here,'" said Colonel Stannard. "I trust we shall have no trouble with the inmates."

At last they were permitted to pass in, and found themselves in a sort of courtyard, surrounded by lofty buildings of dark, gray stone, pierced with many windows, and having galleries running along each story.

Jostling one another in the yard were hundreds of

the lamas, and as Kent's eyes fell upon them a strange feeling of loathing and dread came over him, for never before had he seen such utterly repulsive-looking creatures. In face and form alike they presented an appalling picture of human degradation.

CHAPTER VI

AMONG UGLY CUSTOMERS

IMMEDIATELY on entering the lamasery, Colonel Stannard asked to be presented to the "gegen," as the father superior of the institution was called.

"Tell them I should like to pay my respects to him," he instructed the interpreter, and his message was duly delivered.

In response, they were led by a grizzled old lama, who might have furnished a painter with a capital model for Silenus, across the courtyard, and through different dark corridors, into a large, dimly-lighted room, empty of everything save a sort of divan at the farther end.

Here they were left to themselves for so long a time that Colonel Stannard grew impatient.

"Let us get out of this again," he said, "I don't propose spending the afternoon waiting upon the gegen's pleasure." But when he tried the door by which they had entered, they found it strongly fastened.

"Why, what's the meaning of this?" he exclaimed. "They've locked us in, confound their impudence."

As he realized that they were thus made prisoners a chill of apprehension came over him. He had heard some startling stories concerning this lamasery, but had not put much faith in them, taking them to be mere travellers' tales.

But this strange treatment did not seem at all reassuring, and he felt impelled to knock loudly on the door for some one to open it.

His blows echoed through the corridor yet evoked no response, and he was beginning to feel really alarmed, when Kent plucked his sleeve and whispered in his ear :

“There’s somebody coming into the room.”

Turning about, Colonel Stannard was surprised to see the curtain behind the divan drawn aside, disclosing a door through which was now entering a richly-robed personage that he knew at once must be the gegen.

As this man was supposed by the lamas to be a living manifestation of the Buddha and, therefore, an object of profound veneration, the colonel regarded him with the keenest interest. He was not more than thirty years of age, and of medium height, with a plump figure, due, no doubt, to luxurious living. His countenance was well favoured, and would have been pleasing but for the crafty expression of the eyes and the hard sensual lines of the mouth. Altogether he had the appearance of a man who thoroughly understood the art of caring for number one, and who was not to be greatly relied upon to do anything else.

Colonel Stannard and Kent bowed respectfully, and the interpreter hastened to explain who they were and the object of their visit.

The gegen listened with an inscrutable smile, and then replied in a tone of assumed humility to the effect that both himself and the institution were highly honoured, and that he trusted his foreign friends would be pleased by what they saw.

After a further interchange of formal civilities the gegen made a lengthy speech that seemed to throw the interpreter into confusion, and Colonel Stannard awaited its translation with some anxiety.

When repeated to him it proved to be a sort of dissertation upon the excellence and importance of the institution over which his holiness had the privilege to preside, concluding with a demand, vested in flowery yet unmistakable language, for a substantial subscription toward its support.

"Do you hear that, Kent?" said the colonel in an undertone. "We've had to pay handsomely to get in, and now it looks as though we'd have to pay still more to get out. I shall refuse to do anything of the kind."

The interpreter was accordingly instructed to explain that they had already paid a good sum for admittance to the lamasery, and that with all due respect to his holiness, they did not think it right to be called upon for more.

The interpreter evidently found this very difficult to say, and sought to disguise the kernel of truth under a thick covering of compliment.

But in spite of his fulsome phraseology, the gegen's crafty countenance darkened, and his response was in a tone that showed decided irritation.

Thereupon ensued a protracted argument, which tried Colonel Stannard's self-control sorely, and in the end, realizing with keen chagrin that the rascally gegen had in every way the best of the situation, he effected a compromise by consenting to pay one-half the amount at first demanded of him. Having done this with as good grace as he could muster, he asked that he be conducted to the gate.

The gegen graciously gave the command, and the old lama who had led them into the trap reopened the door. As he went on before through the long corridors, Colonel Stannard felt strongly tempted to give him the kicking he richly deserved, but he knew that that would have been an act of supreme folly under the circumstances.

When they reached the courtyard they found it more crowded than before with lamas, who seemed disposed to obstruct their progress toward the gate.

They deliberately got in the way of the visitors, and refused to move aside, so that Colonel Stannard and Kent were compelled to dodge to right and left in an undignified fashion that made them both angry.

Not content with this, they thrust their sinister countenances, which bore the marks of the most degrading vices, close up to the others' faces, blurting out what was unintelligible to them, but what was no doubt coarse ridicule, as it always evoked a chorus of rude laughter.

Seething with wrath, yet fully realizing the supreme need of self-control, the colonel pushed ahead as rapidly as he could, Kent keeping close in his wake, and they had got more than half-way across the courtyard when their way was blocked altogether by the lamas encircling them, and evincing a determination not to budge, while they shouted something in raucous tones that was evidently a demand.

"What is it they want?" asked Colonel Stannard of the guide, whose ashen face and trembling frame showed that he was terror-stricken at the aspect of affairs.

"They want you to pay them some money," the Chinaman replied, "and they say they won't let us go until you do."

"I'll do nothing of the kind," cried the colonel indignantly. "I've paid handsomely already, and shall not give another penny. Tell them to get out of our way, or there'll be trouble."

The guide knew better than to interpret these strong words literally; but, soften them as he might, he had to express refusal, and the hideous crowd grew noisier and rougher when they had their answer.

They jostled rudely against the Englishmen, and one of them, snatching Kent's hat from his head, flung it away, while another sought to do the same to Colonel Stannard, but was foiled by a quick parry.

Matters were now looking very serious, indeed. The lamas seemed complete masters of the situation, and there was no foretelling to what lengths their brutality might go.

Even had Colonel Stannard been willing to accede to their demand for money he could not have done so then, since he had emptied his purse for the benefit of the *gegen*.

Bitterly regretting that he had ever entered the horrid place, and sorely perplexed as to how to obtain extrication from their critical position, the colonel looked anxiously about him.

"Oh, for a dozen of my good men," he muttered. "I would soon teach these ruffians a lesson they would be long in forgetting."

Suddenly there was a change in the conduct of the crowd of lamas. They abated their noise and drew away from the visitors.

The next moment the reason for their action became plain, for the *gegen* himself appeared with a number of attendants, and from the expression of his countenance evidently felt much annoyed at the unruly behaviour of his pupils.

Approaching with slow, stately steps, he said a few words in a commanding voice, and at once the lamas slunk off like frightened street curs, leaving Colonel Stannard and Kent in the centre of the courtyard.

"Your coming was well-timed," said the colonel half ironically, "else your men would probably have stripped us of our clothes, as you did of our money. Under your kind protection we will now take our leave of this institution, and I can positively assure you, will never enter its door again."

Of course the *gegen* did not understand a word he said, but he smiled graciously, and gave an order

to his attendants, who thereupon hastened to open the big gate for the departure of the visitors.

"I bid your holiness good-bye," said Colonel Stannard, pausing for a moment in the gate; "and if there be a bigger rascal than yourself in the country, I sincerely trust I shall never have anything to do with him."

It was with a feeling of immense relief that they shook the dust of the lamasery off their feet and turned their faces toward the city.

"What an abominable pack of scoundrels!" Kent exclaimed, glancing back at the grim, gray walls of which he was so glad to see the outside again. "And they are supposed to be holy men. What sort of a religion can it be that they profess?"

"A very poor sort, indeed, as you may imagine, Kent," answered his father. "And they make it infinitely worse than it really is. The missionaries will have a hard task showing them the error of their ways, I fear."

"Yes, indeed," responded Kent. "It seems impossible that such wretches should ever become civilized, let alone Christianized."

"Yet wonders just as great have been wrought in the past, and there is no reason why they cannot be again," said Colonel Stannard, who held missionary work in the highest respect, and firmly believed that the time would come when all the people of the world would be brought under Christian influence.

Some days later the patiently-awaited passport from the Tsung-li Yamen, that is, the Chinese foreign

office, was received, and final preparations for the start were entered upon.

Colonel Stannard, after much difficulty, had succeeded in obtaining what might be called a special passport, permitting him to visit Kansu, Yun-nan, Hsen-Chang (the new Dominion), and to go as far as the Ching-hae or Tibetan country under the control of the Hsi-ning Ambam.

This opened the road to L'hasa for him as far as Nagch'uka, and he trusted to his own diplomacy and resource to accomplish the rest of the way.

As the journey, whether successful or not, would occupy a full year, during which time there could be no communication of any kind with civilization, it was necessary to take a very complete outfit, and consequently quite an imposing array of carts was required.

When they appeared, Kent's indignation was stirred by the miserable appearance of the worn-out ponies and bare-boned mules in the shafts.

"Why, what is the good of these scarecrows?" he exclaimed. "They're not fit to work. They'll be falling down on the road before we've gone any distance."

"Nevertheless, we must make the most of them," answered his father, "for there are no better to be had. Perhaps they will prove better than they look," which, as a matter of fact, they did, jogging along day after day at a fair pace, and seeming to improve the farther they went.

As riding in springless carts over roads so rough

as to be unworthy of the name could hardly be pleasant, Colonel Stannard had, after much searching, succeeded in securing four riding-horses for Kent, Champ, Bunty, and himself. They were not particularly handsome animals, and would have created a sensation on the drives at Shanghai or Hong Kong, but they were strong, serviceable beasts, and not to be despised.

It was the first day of September, when, having taken leave of his friends at the legation, all of whom cheerfully assured him they did not expect ever to see him again, Colonel Stannard, with his little party, passed out of the gate at Peking, and began their venturesome journey.

“We are undertaking a big risk, no doubt, Kent,” said he gravely. “But we have only ourselves to consider, and if Providence does permit us to carry out our plans we shall have accomplished something well worth the doing.”

CHAPTER VII

TAKEN CAPTIVE BY THE REBELS

BEFORE leaving the Chinese capital, Colonel Stannard had heard rumours of a rebellion up Jehol way. It was said that the rebels had crossed the great wall and were marching on Peking.

He did not attach much importance to the report at first, since outbreaks of that kind were of frequent occurrence on the northern frontier, but as his party progressed into the interior, more and more was heard about the rebels and their successes until it became clear that the rising must be more serious than usual.

On reaching Hsuan-hua, a town of fifty thousand inhabitants, the proximity of the Jehol rebel bands was shown by little banners being stuck out of numerous houses to indicate that they were places of refuge for the inhabitants.

“They’re evidently expecting a visit from the brigands,” remarked the colonel, “and yet that is the only measure they take to protect themselves against their attack. They are certainly a strange people.

If they had any spirit I would undertake to organize a force in a few days strong enough to squelch the rebels and bring them all to justice."

At this place they learned the facts about this uprising. It seemed that some time ago the chief of a band of highwaymen had given in his submission to the government and, on being pardoned, made himself so agreeable that after a while he was appointed to an official position.

His band, however, which had still held together, retained his name on their banner and kept to the road. This caused the Jehol¹ authorities to believe that the ex-chief, Li, was still connected with the profession, and he was accordingly arrested, tried, and beheaded.

Thereupon his son, animated by a spirit of revenge, assumed the leadership of the band, dubbed himself Ping Ch'ng Wang ("the Prince Leveller of the Ch'ng dynasty"), and announced on his banners that his platform was, "First, right; then, reason; to put an end to the Catholic faith, and to bring down the reigning dynasty."

As he had only a few hundred followers, this was a pretty pretentious programme; yet, having his men well armed with Winchester rifles, he could give a good deal of trouble before being crushed by the government forces.

"I trust we shall not encounter these rebels, Kent," said Colonel Stannard as they left Hsuan-hua for Kalgan. "They might make things awkward for us if they were so disposed."

"Wouldn't it have been better to stay here, then," Kent suggested, "until we find out exactly where they are, and so manage to avoid them?"

"No, my boy, for that might have delayed us too long," responded the colonel. "If we push on as fast as our miserable nags will let us, we ought to reach Kalgan before the rebels cross our road, and once past their line of march we will have no reason to concern ourselves further about them."

Not content with commanding the drivers of the carts to make the best speed possible, and with an offer of extra pay if they reached Kalgan within twenty-four hours, Colonel Stannard directed the Sikh and Goorkha to keep riding up and down the line to see that there was no loitering.

On the way they passed long strings of camels carrying soda to Peking in large blocks balanced on their backs. They came from the Ta-Lung Plain, and were miserable, mangy-looking creatures, to whom life seemed to be utter misery.

"I wonder if there is such a thing as a cheerful camel," Kent remarked, after a particularly squalid lot had passed. "I certainly never saw one anywhere that I've been."

"They're chronic grumblers, to be sure," said his father, "and what with their ugliness and their strong odour are far from pleasant companions. But we shall have to fall back upon them when we can no longer use the carts."

The road to Kalgan was terribly stony, which made a high rate of speed difficult to maintain, and to

further complicate matters, did not one of the mules, a big black fellow that had given more trouble than any of his mates, take it into his cantankerous head to become suddenly smitten with a sort of blind staggers, thereby throwing the party into confusion?

So violent were his struggles and so dangerous the play of his hoofs that it was impossible to do anything for him, and a halt was therefore called until the creature should either recover or die.

During this delay, Kent, accompanied by Bunty and by Hercules, who never separated from him by day or night, went on ahead, and they had left the others about a mile behind, when they were brought to a full stop in a secluded valley through which the road ran by the sight of a large body of mounted men entering from the opposite end.

They were evidently well armed, and carried large banners which flaunted bravely in the ever-blown wind. Immediately on seeing them Kent guessed who they were and, wheeling his horse round, cried: "The rebels, Bunty! Let us run for it."

Bunty promptly followed suit, and they set off at a gallop. The same moment half-a-dozen brigands, for Kent was correct enough as to their character, darted out from the company in hot pursuit, first firing a volley from their rifles, the bullets rattling harmlessly among the rocks.

The fugitives were not only the better mounted, but enjoyed the advantage of a head start that would



... The rebels, Bunt! Let us run for it."

have enabled them to distance their pursuers had not Kent's pony, just as they were leaving the valley, stumbled over a loose stone and come down on his knees, throwing his rider over his head, where he lay stunned by the fall.

In an instant Bunty was beside him and, lifting him up, sought to restore consciousness by every means in his power.

But the rebels came up ere Kent revived and encircled the two with grinning, triumphant faces.

They were an evil-looking lot of men, and Kent realized with a thrill of apprehension that they were quite capable of robbing and murdering the whole party if they saw fit to do so.

Yet there was nothing to be done save to submit quickly, and trust in Providence for deliverance in some way.

Hercules wanted to show fight. The disparity of numbers did not daunt his mighty spirit, and it was only with the greatest difficulty that Kent could hold him back from springing at the throats of those surrounding him.

The leader of the brigands, a more intelligent-looking man than the rest, asked a number of questions, but of course Kent could not understand a word, and was fain to shake his head, replying :

“I don't know what you are saying.”

Seeing that nothing was to be learned from him or Bunty, the leader then gave orders for the progress of the party to be resumed.

They had not gone much farther when fresh excite-

ment was caused by news that a detachment sent on ahead brought in. Kent at once correctly surmised what this was.

They had come upon his father and the rest of the expedition.

"Now we shall be able to understand something," he said, with a sigh of relief, "for one of our men will surely be able to talk their lingo."

Colonel Stannard maintained a bearing of the utmost unconcern, although in truth he was not at all easy in his mind as to the outcome of this encounter with the rebels.

His Chinese cart-drivers were manifestly in a terrible funk. They looked as if they fully expected to be chopped to pieces with little delay, and only after great difficulty could the colonel persuade one of them to act as interpreter. When at last this had been arranged, he held an interview with the commander of the rebels in which he explained that he was simply a harmless traveller through the country, who cast himself upon their consideration, and was willing to pay a reasonable sum for being permitted to pass on without molestation.

He thought it well to add that he was an officer in the service of the great queen, and that if any harm was done to him the perpetrators of it would assuredly be punished.

His words evidently made a deep impression on the commander, who, after listening gravely without making any reply, retired to consult with some of his associates.

"God grant they may accept my offer," said Colonel Stannard, "for we are entirely at their mercy. I rather like the appearance of their leader. He seems to have more than ordinary intelligence, and to be not quite such a ruffian as the rest of them. Our fate lies in his hands, I imagine."

"But they wouldn't really murder us, would they?" exclaimed Kent apprehensively. "They have nothing against us."

"They're quite capable of anything, my son," replied Colonel Stannard, laying his arm affectionately on his shoulder. "Just look at our drivers, how terrified they are. They clearly expect little mercy at the rebels' hands."

The poor servants certainly did present a pitiable picture of panic. Leaving their carts they had huddled together as near their employer as they could get, and with livid countenance and chattering lips seemed to be awaiting their doom. The commander's consultation with his subordinates lasted a long while, during which the Stannards were kept in keen anxiety. But at last the rebel chief returned and informed them through the interpreter that nothing would be done at present, and that they were to be his prisoners until it was decided what to do with them.

"I understand what he is driving at," said the colonel, on hearing this. "He's a shrewd fellow. He thinks we will be useful to him as hostages, or that a big ransom will be paid for our release.

He'll no doubt take us along with him back toward Peking."

The veteran soldier's estimate of the situation was entirely correct. The rebel leader knew too well the value of his captives to deal with them in any rough-and-ready fashion. They could be put to far better use than to be robbed and murdered out of hand.

Relieved at this reprieve, yet much troubled as to the ultimate outcome, Colonel Stannard found himself compelled to retrace his steps during the rest of the day, and at nightfall was many miles farther from Kalgan than he had hoped to be when he set out that morning.

The rebels encamped in a sheltered valley where water and grass abounded, and settled down for the night without taking the trouble to post sentries.

"They don't seem to have any fear of a night attack," commented the colonel, whose soldierly instincts were shocked by such recklessness. "If there be any truth in the rumours that the authorities have sent out soldiers to suppress these fellows, they ought to take some precautions against surprise."

Despite the uncertainty of their situation, Colonel Stannard and Kent, being thoroughly tired out, fell soundly asleep as soon as quiet reigned in the camp, to be awakened a little before dawn by the violent barking of Hercules, who was in a tremendous state of excitement. "Hullo, what's the meaning of this?"

exclaimed the colonel, starting up and hunting for a light.

It was still dark, but presently the welkin rang with bloodcurdling yells, and the hillsides echoed to the reports of guns, until it seemed as if the whole valley was full of furious conflict.

CHAPTER VIII

THE RACE ON THE GREAT WALL

HAPPILY for the Stannard party, their captors had placed them in the centre of the camp for greater security against their effecting their escape. It was therefore easy for them to gather close together, and in obedience to the colonel's orders they all crouched down beside the carts so as to be safe from the bullets which were whistling through the air above their heads.

"I devoutly hope it is the soldiers," said Colonel Stannard, "and that they are in sufficient strength to win the day."

While the struggle continued with unabated vigour the dawn came, and it was possible to get an idea of what was going on.

The rebels had been entirely surrounded by a force of soldiers far stronger than their own, but so fiercely did they defend themselves, that even then they might have got the best of it had they not been taken so completely by surprise that many of them were killed ere they could strike a blow.

As it was, the result seemed uncertain, and Kent, peering out from the protection of the carts, noted with concern that in more than one place the soldiers seemed to be giving way before the reckless impetuosity and daring of the rebels.

It was a strange experience thus to be spectators of the conflict upon the issue of which their own fate hung, and both the Stannards and Champ and Bunty felt strangely tempted to take part.

In this instance, however, discretion was decidedly the better part of valour, so reluctantly enough they restrained their ardour.

At last the soldiers' superior numbers began to tell. Here and there the rebels showed signs of wavering. More than half of them had been struck down, and the remainder were losing heart. Encouraged by this their assailants pressed forward with triumphant yells, clubbing their guns or swinging their long swords.

“They’re winning! They’re winning! Hip, hip, hurrah!” cried Kent, forgetting the need of caution in his joy at the overthrow of the rebels, and jumping to his feet the better to observe it.

Just as he did so several rebels rushed past in full flight, and one of them in sheer gratuitous rage made a vicious thrust at him with the bloody sword he carried.

Kent saw it just in time to spring aside sufficiently to save himself from injury, although the blade went through the sleeve of his coat.

He had been holding a revolver in his right hand,

and ere the dastardly rebel could regain his balance, he flung this at his head, knocking him over like a nine-pin at the feet of the Goorkha, who instantly pinned him to the ground in spite of his frantic struggles.

"Hold him, Bunty! Hold him!" cried Kent. "He'd have killed me if he could, the villain."

Bunty needed no urging. He would have liked to throttle the squirming scoundrel who had dared to attempt the life of his young master, and as it was he kept so tight a grip of his windpipe that the wretch became limp in his hands. Meantime the tide of battle swept on past them. Utterly routed, the rebels fled to the hills pursued by the soldiers, who made no attempt to take prisoners, but slew without mercy every one they could reach.

When at last they were satiated with blood and weary of the chase, they returned to the valley where those whom they had thus rescued were waiting to express their gratitude.

Colonel Stannard then learned that they were indebted for their timely deliverance to a force of soldiers dispatched by Li-Hung-Chang from Tientsin for the dispersion and destruction of the rebels, which commission they had accomplished with no small loss on their own side.

The mandarin in command of the soldiers asked a great many questions of the colonel. He did not seem able to understand his motive in undertaking such a journey, and evidently suspected him of some political purpose.

But there was no gainsaying the authority of the travellers' passports, and so he not only gave permission for them to proceed on their journey, but graciously offered them an escort as far as Kalgan.

This favour Colonel Stannard very gladly accepted, as some of the dispersed rebels might still be hanging about the neighbourhood, and, being rendered desperate by their defeat, would be capable of any crime.

So the journey to Kalgan was completed with all the pomp and circumstance of military power, and the party created quite a sensation when they arrived at the gates of the city.

Here a stay of some days was necessary in order to purchase a number of pack animals, and make other preparations for the continuing of the journey.

The Stannards obtained accommodation at an inn on the market-place facing the shrine of the god of wine, who is the pet deity of the place, and they were therefore in the very best position to observe the ceaseless bustle of this big town, which derived its importance from being one of the chief frontier marts.

While the colonel was laying in supplies of Mongol felt socks, Russian leather boots, buckskin breeches, warm, thick rugs, and other protectors against the merciless cold of the dreary deserts that were to be traversed, Kent, taking Bunty and Hercules with him, explored the city.

It was not a particularly interesting place, and, soon exhausting its sights, he turned his attention to the great wall of China, which at this point pre-

sented a more imposing appearance than it had when they met with it nearer Peking.

Not content with climbing it at different points, and ascending to the summits of the watch-tower, Kent conceived a scheme that with his wonted energy and promptitude he proceeded to put into execution.

This was to have a ride on pony-back along the top of the great structure just in order that he might boast of having done so.

He said nothing about it to his father, lest he should put his veto upon it, but took Bunty into his confidence as he wanted him to accompany him.

After some looking about he found a place where access might be gained to the top of the wall by means of a staircase running up through one of the towers, and one morning he and Bunty rode thither on their ponies.

There was no one to bar their way, and after considerable difficulty with the ponies, who did not take at all kindly to climbing the stone steps, they at last succeeded in getting them up.

“There, now,” exclaimed Kent, in a tone of triumph, when this had been accomplished, “we’re on top at last, and I doubt very much if any Englishman was ever here before. Just see how smooth and level this is. We shall be able to have a splendid ride.”

Bunty had been rather averse to the idea at first, only giving way before Kent’s insistence; but now he got into the spirit of it likewise.

“Yes, for sure,” he responded. “This is a fine

road. I like it," and he stamped his foot upon the pavement.

Mounting their ponies they set off at a trot in a westward direction, greatly enjoying their novel ride in spite of the high wind that prevailed and seemed ambitious of blowing them clear off the wall if it could.

From their elevated position they had an extensive view over the country, and they could see the wonderful wall extending east and west over hill and vale until the eye could follow it no farther.

"Just think of all the men and money it must have taken to build this vast affair, Bunty," said Kent, who had been told a great deal about it by his father, and now seized the opportunity of displaying his knowledge. "Why, it is more than a thousand miles long altogether, and as big and broad as this nearly all the way, and it climbs mountains, and goes down into valleys just as easy as it crosses the plains. I am sorry it doesn't go the same way as we do, for then we might travel along the top of it so far as it lasted."

Bunty listened with great attention. He entertained a profound respect for his young master's intellectual attainments, and was always eager to receive instruction from him.

Having gone several miles and enjoyed it very much, they turned about, and were about half-way back to their starting-point when Kent, who was in the mood for something reckless, proposed they should have a race.

"We couldn't have a better track," he said, "and your pony is as good as mine. Come along, Bunty, I'll give you twenty yards' start to make up for the difference in weight."

Nothing loth, Bunty went ahead the twenty yards, and then, Kent giving the signal, they started off lickety-split, both shouting and lashing their sturdy steeds as if they were on a regular race-course.

Probably never before, through all the twenty centuries of the great wall's existence, had it been used for such a purpose, and surely if ever stones had reason to cry out in protest it was when these immemorial defenders of the empire were being treated by "foreign devils" with such indignity.

But little recked either Kent or Bunty. They were having a fine time, and carried away by the excitement of the contest, they urged the ponies to their utmost speed in joyous unconcern.

Their stone race-course was pretty rough in some places, and only sure-footed Chinese ponies could have negotiated it in safety. As it was they more than once narrowly escaped coming a cropper.

Kent had a particularly close shave, for his pony tripped so hard as to be brought to his knees, almost pitching his rider over his head, and only by a remarkable display of equestrian skill did the boy avoid a nasty fall, which, considering the nature of the ground, could hardly have failed to mean many bruises, if not a broken limb.

"Almost down that time, Bunty," he cried gaily, when he had recovered the balance of himself and

his pony. "But a miss is as good as a mile. Away we go again," for Bunty, seeing the stumble, had pulled his shaggy steed back on his haunches.

They were now nearing the city, and had just come in sight of the tower by which they reached the top of the wall, when Kent exclaimed:

"Halloo! what's that? a guard of honour waiting to receive us?" For not more than a hundred yards ahead, a small body of soldiers appeared, drawn up so as to completely obstruct the passage.

They were armed with lances and looked quite imposing as the bright sunshine fell upon their flapping banners and gleaming weapons.

The moment Kent saw them he guessed what they meant, and although he pretended to make light of it, he really felt not a little concerned as to the issue of the meeting.

"Hold up, Bunty," he called out, "we mustn't run into them. They might not like it. I wonder what they've got to say to us."

They were now close upon the soldiers, several of whom, the moment they stopped, seized their bridle-reins and tugged at them energetically, while they poured out a volley of questions in their harsh, guttural tongue.

But not a word could either Kent or Bunty understand, although they both took it for granted that they were being called upon to explain their conduct in making a race-course of the great wall.

So they simply smiled blandly and offered no resistance. Their captors soon realized that there

was no satisfaction to be obtained from them, and accordingly decided to take them before the authorities. They therefore hustled them rather rudely down through the tower and into the street leading to the market-place, on one side of which stood the court house.

CHAPTER IX

A FRIEND IN NEED

"I WONDER what they'll do to us, Bunty?" said Kent in as unconcerned a tone as he could muster. "Make us pay some sort of a fine I suppose."

Bunty had no suggestions to offer. He looked to his young master to get him out of the difficulty, and had entire confidence that he would accomplish it somehow.

As they passed along the street they evidently attracted a good deal of curiosity, and a crowd began to gather which received additions every few steps, until by the time the market-place was reached it had swelled to large proportions.

It happened that, as they came within sight of the inn at which Colonel Stannard had put up, he was standing by the door looking out for Kent, who was overdue for dinner.

Observing the excitement he went over to ascertain the cause, and was much concerned at finding his son the centre of interest. Pushing his way through the rabble and the guarding soldiers he reached Kent's side and demanded what it all meant.

"I'm afraid I've got into a bit of a scrape," replied Kent, looking rather shamefaced. "We've been having a ride on the top of the wall, and they've arrested us for it."

Colonel Stannard could not forbear a laugh at this unexpected explanation.

"Well, Kent," he said, "you certainly have the genius of enterprise in a remarkable degree. Who but yourself would ever have thought of such a thing, and now, no doubt, you are to be haled before the magistrate. I'm glad I saw you in time to go with you."

Kent, it need hardly be said, was no less delighted at his father's timely appearance, as he had no doubt that he would be able to extricate him and Bunty from their predicament.

The magistrate was ready to receive them, and assumed a specially important air at sight of the foreigners, for he did not often have the opportunity of adjudging a case in which they were concerned.

When the soldiers who had taken Kent and Bunty in charge gave their evidence, the magistrate looked very grave. The offence so thoughtlessly committed was by no means a trifling one in his estimation, for the great wall ranked as a sacred construction only second to the temples, and these foreigners had certainly been guilty of flagrant sacrilege. He accordingly expressed himself in strong language as to the enormity of their offence.

Unfortunately, although the Stannards could gather from his expression and gestures some idea of how

things were going, they could not understand a single word of what was being said, and when the colonel essayed to speak on his son's behalf, he was dismayed to find that he could not make himself intelligible, and that apparently there was no one present to interpret, the Chinaman who had acted in that capacity so far having evidently been afraid to enter the court.

The situation was an awkward one and might indeed become critical, and Colonel Stannard was sorely perplexed as to the solution of the difficulty, when he was approached by an odd-looking man who, in very fair English, asked him if he did not want an interpreter.

"I do, indeed, most urgently," he responded. "Can you fill the office? You seem to know English pretty well."

As he spoke he scrutinized the person who was offering such timely assistance. He was a short, squat man, with a bronzed, weather-beaten countenance, scored with innumerable wrinkles, but bearing an expression of rugged honesty rarely found in this part of the world.

Keen intelligence and quick humour gleamed in his deep-set eyes, while the wide gap of his mouth was enclosed by straight, firm lips that bespoke dogged determination.

Colonel Stannard, to whose penetrating glance most men were open books, was favourably impressed at once, and when the man replied, "I can interpret for you. I understand all that they have been saying," he at once put the case into his hands.

Thereupon ensued a long and tedious argument, Kent offering profound apologies for having unwittingly offended, in which his father joined, and the mandarin in a most irritating way going over the matter again and again as if there was something to be effected by mere repetition. Finally Colonel Stannard, his patience being completely exhausted, offered to pay a goodly sum by way of compromise. At this the crafty countenance of the magistrate suddenly brightened, and after a little consideration he suggested a still larger amount.

But the colonel would not make any advance, and the controversy continued until in the end his offer was accepted, and the proceedings were terminated by the release of Kent and Bunty.

"Your bit of fun has proved rather expensive, Kent," said the colonel dryly as they left the court-room. "The next time you want to have a race, pray be good enough to choose some less venerated place."

"You may be sure I will," responded Kent, who felt really sorry for the trouble he had given his father. "I sha'n't make such a mistake the second time."

The man who had proved such a friend in need having been requested to come to see them at the inn, presented himself shortly after their return to their rooms, and they had a long talk with him.

It seemed that he was a Tibetan trader who had made the trip to L'hasa no less than three times, and was familiar with the whole country and the different

tribes inhabiting it. He himself was not wholly of either the Chinese, Tartar, or Tibetan race, but a mixture of them all, the result of this strange hybrid origin being that he had a sort of a cosmopolitan character, and was able to adapt himself to the peculiarities of the people he encountered and to acquire their language with remarkable ease.

He called himself Tokoura, and as the colonel conversed with him he realized of what immense service he would be to him in the capacity of guide and interpreter.

He accordingly explained to him the object of his expedition, and offered to engage him at a good salary.

Tokoura listened with a grave, non-committal countenance. He evidently regarded Colonel Stannard's undertaking as a very daring one, and proceeded to expatiate upon the dangers and difficulties of the route, the arduous character of the route to be traversed, the dreadful deserts of ever-shifting sand that had to be crossed, the tremendous mountains which must be overcome, the turbulent rivers that had to be forded or ferried, the rapacious brigands who infested many districts, and finally, the opposition of the L'hasa authorities, who would certainly endeavour to prevent the sacred city from being entered by the foreigners.

But with all this Colonel Stannard was already familiar, and it did not move him in the slightest degree, although it made Kent feel a little dubious as to the wisdom of this enterprise.

"Yes, yes, I have heard all that before," he replied with some impatience in his tone; "and I have given it full consideration. Nothing you can say will dissuade me from my purpose. What I want to know of you is not the obstacles in our way, but whether you will help us overcome them. Will you come with us to show us the best route, and to be our interpreter? I will pay you any sum in reason for your services you may name."

Tokoura asked time to consider, and promised to return the next morning with his decision.

"I do hope he will come with us, father," said Kent, who, in spite of the man's uncomeliness of face and figure, had already taken a liking to him, because he was keen enough to see through his unprepossessing exterior and apprehend the sterling nature beneath. "He will be of immense help to us, won't he?"

"He will prove absolutely invaluable, my son," replied Colonel Stannard; "and should he consent to join us, our encountering him in the odd way we did will be nothing short of providential. In fact, I shall be quite willing to forgive you for getting into the scrape you did, and shall consider the fine I had to pay for you an excellent investment."

"At that rate Tokoura must come," laughed Kent. "I wonder if there is anything I could do to influence him."

Without knowing it he had already done something in that direction, for Tokoura, who was all alone in the world, his wife having died while he was off on

one of his long journeys, leaving him no children, had looked upon the handsome English boy with kindling eyes.

Indeed, it was the interest he had aroused in him on sight which had impelled this curious character to make so timely an offer of his services as interpreter ; and now that the colonel's offer was before him for consideration, he found a strong argument for accepting it in the attachment he had suddenly conceived for the young foreigner. The Stannards awaited the return of Tokoura with much anxiety. With him to help it seemed as if the success of the enterprise were almost assured, while without him its difficulties would be greatly enhanced.

He came just as they had finished breakfast, and in true Oriental fashion seemed more desirous of discussing any other subject than the one which was of supreme importance.

At last, Colonel Stannard, growing impatient, put the question to him straight :

“ Well, Tokoura, what is your decision ? I need not say how greatly I hope that it is to come with us.”

Tokoura's face suddenly became as expressionless as if carved in stone, and he squatted before them in silence for so long a time that the suspense became unbearable to Kent, who went up to him, and putting his hand upon his shoulder, said coaxingly :

“ Of course you're coming, Tokoura. You know we can't get along without you.”

The effect upon the man was magical. The hard lines of his face suddenly melted into a smile that

spread all over his bronzed features, and looking up at Kent with a curious expression of good-will, he said simply :

“ I will go.”

“ Hurrah ! that’s splendid,” cried Kent, clapping him heartily on the back. “ We’ll treat you well, Tokoura, if you take good care of us.”

The details of the engagement were easily settled, for Tokoura was far from exorbitant in his terms, and Colonel Stannard not only agreed at once to what he asked, but promised him a handsome bonus if they should succeed in reaching L’hasa, and getting back again in safety.

With the efficient aid of Tokoura the remaining work of preparation went rapidly forward. The carts were to be discarded at Kalgan, and the next stage of the long journey effected on horse and camel-back. It was therefore necessary to purchase additional horses and quite a herd of camels, as these ugly, ill-tempered, but indispensable creatures were to carry all the heavy baggage.

By dint of much tedious bargaining, a sufficient number of both animals was at length secured, and the Stannard expedition set forth from Kalgan.

It constituted quite a good-sized caravan of itself, comprising, as it did, a dozen camels, half as many more horses, and twelve men, including the camel-drivers and grooms, not forgetting that superb creature, Hercules, who bounded along beside Kent’s pony, manifesting by thunderous barking his delight at their being off again.

“Tokoura is going to lead us along the same route as that taken by those brave French missionaries, Abbés Gabet and Huc, half a century ago,” said Colonel Stannard, his handsome face alight with an expression of high enterprise; “and if we only meet with as good fortune as they did I shall be perfectly satisfied.”

CHAPTER X

A NOCTURNAL DISTURBER

IT was a clear but cold day in middle autumn when the Stannard caravan got in motion. A violent wind blew from the west, and retarded their progress, but every day was windy in the regions through which they had to pass, the natives having a saying that no day was perfect unless it blew hard during a good part of it.

Kent at first found the incessant breeze, often rising into a regular gale, very trying to his temper; but in time he became used to it, and even missed it when at rare intervals there came a prolonged calm.

Just as they left the town his attention was attracted by two curious-looking cages that were hung up in a conspicuous place, and on going close to them he was horrified to find that they each contained the head of a man dreadfully disfigured. He at once asked of Tokoura:

“What is the meaning of these horrid things? Why have they hung them up there in so public a place?”

Whereupon Tokoura explained that these heads

had not long ago been upon the shoulders of highwaymen who were caught red-handed and punished in this way in order that their fate might dissuade others from following their evil example.

"The poor wretches," said Kent compassionately. "They've certainly paid dearly for their crimes. It makes me think of the good old times in England, when they did much the same thing with highwaymen and murderers, gibbeting them by the wayside. We were not so much better than the Chinese in those days, were we, father?"

"I'm happy to say we've improved a good deal since then," answered the colonel; "but we've plenty to learn yet, and even these Chinese and Tartars have some things worth our imitating."

The country through which they travelled was utterly devoid of interest, there being nothing worthy of the name of a road, but simply a rude track which, without the aid of Tokoura, might often have been lost, and Kent was very glad when a little before sunset they halted at an inn for the night.

The landlord of these establishments bears the high-sounding title of "comptroller of the chest," and considers himself quite an important functionary. This one received them very graciously, and put the whole place at their disposal with as impressive an air as if it were an elegant hostelry.

Kent laughed when he realized how poor the accommodation really was, for it consisted merely of a large, square enclosure, formed by high poles interlaced with brushwood, in the centre of which

stood a mud-house of considerable size, and about ten feet high.

With the exception of a couple of miserable little rooms, looking like horse-stalls, at each end, the whole of this structure was in one large room, in which everybody cooked, ate, and slept.

Full three-fourths of this large apartment was occupied by the *kang*, a sort of stone furnace, several feet in height, and having a smooth, flat top covered with a reed mat, upon which well-to-do travellers spread their own rugs. At one end of the *kang* three huge caldrons were set in, these constituting the sole cooking apparatus of the establishment, and being used in common by the guests.

As the dried dung of cattle furnished the fuel for the furnace, and there was no outlet for the stifling smoke save through the door of the inn, the state of the atmosphere may be imagined.

“Ugh! I can never stand this,” cried Kent angrily as he beat a quick retreat from the smothering smoke. “We’ll have to find other quarters surely.”

“I’m afraid there are no other quarters to find,” replied his father, smiling indulgently at the boy’s disgust; “and as this is the sort of thing we’ll have the whole of the way, we may as well begin to get used to it here.”

Kent made a grimace and shrugged his shoulders.

“Why not put up our tents?” he asked. “They wouldn’t be so warm, of course, but they’d be ever so much better than this horrible place.”

“Because that would take too much time, and it

is now late," answered the colonel. "Never mind, my boy. Just make your mind up to endure it, disagreeable as it is."

That first night in a Tartar inn Kent long remembered. What during the day had served as kitchen, dining-room, smoking-room, and gambling hall, was now converted into a dormitory.

A number of other travellers had arrived, and these proceeded to dispose themselves as best they could.

Colonel Stannard had appropriated the part of the *kang* farthest from the door for himself and Kent, and when their rugs had been spread upon the reed mat they had a couch by no means to be despised.

The other members of their party found places for themselves, and soon after nightfall all settled down to rest.

But, tired as he was, Kent could not sleep. The foul atmosphere of the crowded room, which was dimly lighted by an apology for a lamp, consisting of a miserable wick floating in thick, dirty, stinking oil, the proximity of so many strangers, some of them looking like ruffians fit for any misdeeds, the oppressive heat, which really seemed harder to endure than the outside cold, all these combined to make him wakeful, and he keenly envied his father, who, with the calmness of an old campaigner, had laid himself down to sleep soundly.

For an hour or more he tossed about on his rug, vainly trying one position after another in the hope of finding one favourable to sleep. At last, in sheer

weariness, he was just about dropping off when, by the faint, flickering light of the wretched little lamp, he saw one of the other guests slowly rise from his corner, and 'stealthily approach the *kang*.

Instantly his suspicions were aroused, for there was something about the man's catlike movements that boded no good.

"That fellow's up to some mischief," Kent said to himself. "I'll just keep my eye on him."

The man crept noiselessly up to the *kang* and then stood beside it, carefully scrutinizing its occupants. He evidently had a definite object and was seeing how it could best be attained.

Through his half-closed eyelids Kent could observe every movement, and he resolved to keep perfectly quiet until the man's purpose should become plain. Indeed, the idea of playing the part of detective quite tickled him and he felt glad that he had not fallen asleep.

Pausing long enough to assure himself that everybody was sleeping soundly, the man, with the soft, silent movements of a panther, made his way around the side of the *kang* to the back where Colonel Stannard lay.

"Ah, ha," said Kent under his breath. "That's your little game, is it? You'd like to get your hands on my father's knapsack, no doubt."

That he had some such design was soon evident, for having got within touch of the colonel, he proceeded to feel cautiously about the unconscious sleeper, who did not stir. But Kent did. The



“You rascal! I've caught you.”

moment the scoundrel's purpose was revealed, he sprang up and threw himself upon him, crying out :

" You rascal ! I've caught you."

The man was a thick-set, powerful fellow, quite too strong for Kent, who, however, had the advantage of taking him by surprise, which enabled him at the start to hurl him on his back and get astride of his chest.

But the next instant, by a mighty effort, he had thrown Kent off and then reversed their positions, crushing the lad to the ground under his heavy frame.

Had the issue been left to them only, it would undoubtedly have gone ill with Kent, who was, indeed, no match for the ruffian he so gallantly attacked ; but he had not long to fight unaided.

Aroused by his son's exclamation and the noise of the struggle, Colonel Stannard awoke. One glance was sufficient to make him understand the situation, and in the winking of an eye he had the nocturnal disturber by the throat, tearing him off Kent and throwing him on his back, when he promptly kneeled upon him, pinning him down to the ground so that he could not stir.

By this time the whole room was aroused and in great confusion, the sleepy guests trying to find out from one another what had happened, and anxiously examining their own belongings lest they should have suffered loss.

With the aid of Tokoura the baffled thief was bound, hand and foot, and then, after much more

noise and chatter, the different inmates of the room once more settled down to sleep.

This time Kent fared better. Proud of himself for having foiled the rascal, and pleased with his father's praise, he presently fell asleep, and did not waken until all the others were in motion for the day.

When breakfast had been dispatched, and it was time to set out on their journey, the question was what to do with the prisoner.

There was no magistrate at hand to whom to turn him over for punishment, and yet it did not seem right to let him go scot free. Colonel Stannard accordingly decided to take the law into his own hands, and so he sentenced him to receive a sound beating, which Champ and Bunty evidently took much satisfaction in administering. He was then released, with the injunction to behave better in future. He slunk away, muttering maledictions, and fully resolved, no doubt, to have vengeance on the "foreign devils," if he ever got his chance.

This day's journey brought the travellers into a very broken country, leading up to the mountain called Sain-Oula, or "Good Mountain," probably because there was nothing good about it, the reputation for fatal accidents and tragical adventures that it possessed being of the darkest.

Tokoura, who evidently liked to make the most of the difficulties and dangers of their route, not to deter them from carrying out their purpose, but so as to magnify the importance of his own position as guide, had a great deal to say about this "Good Mountain."

It was noted for its severe frosts, he told them. Hardly a winter passed without many travellers falling victims to the cold, and frequently whole caravans, not arriving at their destination, would be sought and found in this bleak place, both man and beast frozen to death.

Nor was this the only danger. Wild beasts abounded, and so too did robbers, who were always on the watch for their prey. According to Tokoura, the latter were curiously polite in their procedure. When they came upon a promising victim, they did not begin with violence, but addressed him in some such fashion as this:

"Venerable elder brother, I am on foot, as you see. Pray lend me your horse. I am without money. Will you oblige me with your purse? The cold is penetrating to my bones, kindly let me have your cloak."

If the venerable brother graciously complies, he is warmly thanked and allowed to pass on without further damage, but if he refuses, the requests are made more emphatic with a cudgel, and should he still prove obstinate, recourse is had to the sword.

Kent was greatly tickled at the idea of the robbers showing such good manners while plying their nefarious trade.

"What fun it would be to get hold of some of them and put them through the same mill just to see how they would like it," he said. "I just hope we'll come across a party of them, provided, of course, it's not too big for us to master."

"I would much prefer giving them a wide berth in any event, my son," said Colonel Stannard. "We're not here to effect reforms, but simply to carry out our own plans, and we can't afford to spend either our time or strength in teaching robbers lessons in good behaviour, unless, of course, they presume to interfere with us, and then we shall certainly do our duty."

CHAPTER XI

LOST IN THE FOREST

AFTER a toilsome journey of many hours they reached a plateau at the summit of Sain-Oula, whence they had a wide-extended view across the plains of Tartary, and could see the tents of the Mongols ranged in semicircles upon the slopes of the hills, and looking in the distance like so many beehives, while the herds of cattle browsing near seemed no larger than bumble bees.

“There lies our route,” said Colonel Stannard, pointing south-west, “and I wish it was all as easy-going as that will be.”

Tokoura, who was standing by him, shook his head solemnly, saying: “You speak truly, master; but such is not the case. We shall have many high mountains to climb and many broad rivers to cross ere we reach the end of our journey.”

“Well, we’re quite prepared for it, Tokoura,” responded the colonel, who quite understood the guide and never allowed himself to be impressed by his magnifying of what they had before him.

It was late in the afternoon ere they traversed the

plateau, and descending the other side of the mountain came to the edge of the Imperial Forest, that here covered a great extent of country.

A grassy nook, surrounded by tall trees and having a spring of sweet water near by, offered all the requisites for a good camping-place. So the tents were pitched and preparation made for spending the night.

After the evening meal had been eaten and they were sitting close around the big fire which the autumn atmosphere made so welcome, Tokoura had much to say about the fine hunting which this Imperial Forest afforded. According to him it abounded in large game, including many kinds of deer, while tigers, bears, wild-boars, and wolves were scarcely less numerous.

On hearing this, the sporting instincts of the whole party were aroused, and Kent voiced the feeling of more than himself when he exclaimed: "Oh, father, let us stop here a couple of days and have some hunting. We're not bound to hurry along. We can take our time, and we might lay in a stock of fine venison that would last us a week in this cold weather."

"That's not a bad suggestion, Kent," replied Colonel Stannard, "and I think I'll follow it for one day, at all events. Our pack animals will be the better for a rest, and if we succeed in securing a stag or two our larder will receive a very welcome addition."

Tokoura, always making the most of everything, then proceeded to regale them with harrowing recitals of tragedies which had taken place in the recesses of the forest, when hunters or woodcutters, getting

separated from their party, had fallen victims to the ferocious creatures whose domain it was, until the colonel grew weary of his doleful talk.

"Tut, tut!" he said impatiently. "Be good enough to change the subject. We're not to be frightened by your dismal yarns. We can take care of ourselves, however numerous or fierce the wild beasts may be."

Tokoura looked rather hurt, but said no more, and the conversation took on a more cheerful tone as the others discussed the chances of the morrow and expressed their preferences in regard to the expected subjects of their hunter's prowess, one putting himself down for a stag, another for a bear, and a third for a tiger, and so on, the whole thing being carried on in a spirit of fun rather than of serious intention.

The next day dawned bright and clear with little wind, and the camp was soon astir with preparations for the day's hunting.

Colonel Stannard thought it best to divide his little force into three parties, one of which should remain in charge of the camp and the animals, while the other two should take different routes through the forest, so timing themselves as to get back to the camp by the middle of the afternoon.

Kent begged that he might have the lead of one of these parties, taking Champ and Bunty with him, while his father should take Tokoura, and then they would see which had secured the biggest bag when the day was over.

"I am not sure that that is quite the best arrangement, my boy," answered the colonel; "but since you

seem so eager about it I'll agree. You must not attempt anything rash, however, and take care not to be separated from the others. Tokoura's tales may have more truth in them than we imagine."

Kent, of course, promised to be prudent, and so the matter was arranged as he desired.

They all set off in good spirits, one of the camel-drivers, who knew the country, serving as guide to Kent's party, while Tokoura undertook that office for the colonel's. With each little band went several of the Mongol servants to act as porters in the event of game being secured.

Colonel Stannard steered to the north and Kent to the south, and they soon disappeared from sight of each other in the dense forest.

For an hour or more Kent and his companions pushed on without discovering any indications of what they sought.

"I guess old Tokoura's been drawing the long bow a good deal about this wonderful forest," Kent remarked to Bunty as they halted for a few minutes to rest. "If the wild animals are really as thick as he said they were we ought surely to have come upon some trace of them by this time."

"That is just what I was thinking," responded Bunty. "But maybe we'll find some soon."

Proceeding a little farther they approached an open glade, on the other side of which they sighted something that sent a thrill of joy to their hearts.

It was a superb stag with wide-spreading antlers,

lying beneath a tree and evidently quite unaware of their proximity.

Crouching close together behind a clump of trees, they held a whispered council.

Kent suggested that they divide into two parties, and make their way around the glade from opposite directions so as to secure a double chance of a shot at their quarry.

This approved itself to the others, and accordingly accompanied by Champ he set off to the right, while Bunty and the guide went to the left, and as silently as shadows they crept toward the unsuspecting stag.

It was not very easy work, for there were many dry branches and loose stones to be avoided, and twisted roots to be stepped over noiselessly, so that they made slow progress.

But at last Kent and Bunty got within range, and almost at the same instant fired.

Like a flash the stag sprang to his feet, and after one quick terrified glance around to discover the source of this sudden attack, leaped away into the depths of the forest.

“We’ve hit him! He’s wounded!” cried Kent exultantly. “Come along, let us follow him,” and, without waiting for the others, he dashed after the stag, whose bloody trail showed clearly that one if not both the bullets had taken effect. Bunty was not far behind him, and big Champ lumbered in the rear, the other members of the party, not being carried away by the excitement of the chase, following at a more measured pace. The ground was very rough,

and, burdened as he was with a heavy rifle, Kent found it hard to get over, so that presently Bunty, who was more used to such going, outstripped him, saying as he passed :

“ I will catch him up. You come along.”

“ All right,” panted Kent, who was beginning to lose his wind. “ I’ll follow as fast as I can.”

But by the time he had run about half-a-mile in this fashion he was completely blown, and was fain to halt, leaving the finish of the chase to Bunty, who was soon out of both sight and sound.

Champ came up equally out of breath, and they decided to stay where they were until the report of Bunty’s rifle would indicate his whereabouts.

“ I hope he won’t follow the creature too far,” Kent said, “ for he might get lost in this bewildering place.” As he spoke the sound of a rifle-shot came to them so faintly that he exclaimed : “ Why, there he is, and what a distance away ! I wonder if he has brought the stag down this time.”

Champ shook his head and looked grave. The more he saw of the Imperial Forest the less he liked it, and he already felt apprehensive as to his little friend finding his way back to them.

“ He should not go so far,” he said in his smooth, deep voice. “ If he gets lost, how shall we find him ? ”

“ Let us signal to him,” said Kent, and they accordingly fired off their guns one after the other.

This evoked no response from Bunty, but served to bring up the rest of their party, who quickened their

pace in the belief that something was happening which they must not miss.

The question now was, what to do about Bunty. Should they continue to follow him without anything to guide them as to his course, for neither he nor the stag now left any discernible tracks on the hard rough ground, or had they better remain where they were, trusting that he would make his way back to them?

Kent's idea was to follow him, but all the others opposed it, and the guide suggested building a big fire, the smoke of which might be seen by the Goorkha.

This was accordingly done, and while it burned fiercely Kent made short excursions into the forest, hallooing with the full strength of his lungs, and firing off his rifle from time to time.

The afternoon began to wane, and still there was no sign of Bunty. Another problem now presented itself. If they all returned to the camp Bunty might never find his way back, and yet if they remained where they were for the night Colonel Stannard would be filled with anxiety concerning them.

"I'll tell you what we'll do," said Kent after considering the matter awhile. "You, Champ, will stay here with me and one of the men, while the guide, with the other man, will hurry back to the camp and report what has happened."

This plan at once commanded approval, and was promptly carried out. There was still sufficient food left in the bags to provide a fair supper, and, with abundant wood at hand to maintain a big fire, those

remaining could pass the night tolerably well in spite of the cold.

That night in the depths of the great forest made an ineffaceable impression upon Kent's memory: the dense, mysterious gloom that encircled them was rendered only the more intense by the contrast with the leaping, crackling flames of their fire; the strange, startling sounds that were constantly breaking in upon the stillness of the night, betraying the presence of bloodthirsty brutes ravening for their prey; the piercing cold which banished sleep; and above all the keen anxiety for dear little Bunty, of whom he was so fond, and about whom he imagined all sorts of dreadful things.

Early in the morning Colonel Stannard arrived with Tokoura and several other men. They had fared well in their hunting, having bagged a couple of plump deer that would furnish good venison.

Hercules, who had been left at the camp the day before, was now with them, and Kent greeted him rapturously.

"You dear old chap," he exclaimed, as he patted his massive head; "if you'd been here yesterday I wouldn't have lost track of Bunty, and you must now help me find him."

Hercules wagged his tail and barked softly by way of assent, and Kent already felt more hopeful of the lost one being found.

"We must try to cover as much ground as possible," said the colonel when the whole situation had been made clear to him. "Bunty has evidently met with

some mishap, and our search must be very thorough. We shall spread out in as long a line as we can without getting out of hail of each other, and so advance in the direction in which Bunty disappeared."

In obedience to his orders the line of search was promptly organized, Tokoura taking one end, and Colonel Stannard the other, while Kent and Hercules were in the centre. Only one man was left to keep up the fire at their starting-place.

CHAPTER XII

THE RESCUE OF BUNTY

UNDER the spreading trees and over the rough, hard ground the line of searchers advanced, hailing one another every few minutes to make sure that they were not getting astray themselves.

Kent allowed Hercules to range freely in the hope that he would strike Bunty's scent and be able to follow it up. But they pushed on so long without any sign from the mastiff of his succeeding in this that Kent was beginning to despair, when suddenly he stopped short, snuffed at the ground, and gave a sharp, short bark that said as plainly as words could, "I've found it! I've come upon his track."

"Hurrah, Hercules!" cried Kent, running up and patting him vigorously. "Follow it up, now, follow it up."

The sagacious creature did not need a second bidding. With his big, black muzzle held close to the ground he started off at a pace with which Kent found it hard to keep up.

Summoned by Kent's shouts, the others drew in and joined the procession, which, led by the dog,

pressed forward eagerly, all hands now feeling confident that the object of their quest would soon be found.

For fully half-a-mile Hercules kept on, and then he reached a place where he seemed puzzled. He "checked," to use a fox-hunting phrase, and those following him had time to come up while he was still nosing about in an anxious way.

"What's the matter, Hercules?" asked Colonel Stannard. "Have you lost the scent?"

The mastiff gave a growl that sounded wonderfully like "Yes, I have, confound it, and I can't understand it," and continued his vigorous efforts to recover it.

"Let us all shout together," suggested Kent. "Bunty may be somewhere near, and if he hears us he'll reply."

"Capital idea, my boy," said his father, clapping him on the back. "We'll do it at once."

So they gathered together, and at a signal from the colonel shouted in unison, "Bunty, ahoy! Bunty, ahoy!" and then all listened eagerly.

A moment of silence followed, and then there reached their ears a faint cry that sent a thrill of joy to every heart.

"There he is, he's answering," cried Kent ecstatically.

But the difficulty was to locate the response. It seemed so faint and distant that no one could be sure just whence it had come.

It was at this point that Tokoura distinguished himself. He had not so far shown any deep concern

in the matter, the truth being that he looked upon all the members of the party, save Colonel Stannard and Kent, as being his inferiors and not worth much consideration.

Had Kent been the lost one, Tokoura would assuredly have shown the utmost diligence in the search, but it being only Bunty, he had taken the matter quite coolly.

When the curious, quavering cry came back, however, he wakened up. It evidently touched his heart and stirred him to more activity. Murmuring something that probably meant "I'll find him, see if I don't," he set off at a kind of trot, with his head bent forward in a way that gave him an odd resemblance to an animal questing his prey.

"Stay here a few moments and let us see what he'll do," said the colonel, who was much impressed by the man's actions.

Tokoura ran on in an apparently erratic manner until presently he disappeared behind a clump of trees some distance ahead.

He had been gone a few minutes, and Colonel Stannard was about to follow him, when there came back a loud shout, unmistakably triumphant in tone.

"He's found him," cried Kent joyfully, making a spurt toward the clump of trees, followed hard by the rest of the party.

On the other side of the clump they saw Tokoura, standing at the edge of an opening in the ground and calling to some one who was not visible.

When they reached his side the whole thing became



"They found him quite seriously injured."

plain. At their feet gaped an extraordinary chasm, somewhat resembling in appearance the miniature crater of a volcano, and at the bottom of this lay poor Bunty, and beside him the stag, the latter stiff in death.

With shouts of joy and wondering queries they greeted the Goorkha, and he strove to answer them, but it was evident he was suffering great pain and required prompt assistance. The problem was how to reach him, for the sides of the chasm were very steep and they had nothing in the way of ropes. But Tokoura, who now seemed all afire with zeal, after scrambling about adventurously succeeded in effecting the descent, Colonel Stannard and Kent following his lead until all three were at Bunty's side.

To their vast relief they found him to be not mortally, although quite seriously, injured, and with great care and difficulty he was lifted out of the chasm and carried back to camp on a litter hastily improvised from tree branches.

The story he told was as follows:—Determined to secure the stag, he had pressed on after it, recking naught of the distance, until all his companions were left far behind. At last the animal came to a stop and he was able to put in another shot, which apparently proved fatal, for the stag rolled over on the ground.

In high glee at his success he ran up, and, standing by the creature's head, was about to draw his hunting-knife to cut its throat, when suddenly it sprang up

and made so fierce a thrust at him with its branching antlers that he could parry it only by grasping the tines with both hands. The next thing he knew he had been lifted upon the stag's back and was being carried away at an amazing speed, still holding hard to the antlers.

Believing that the animal could not go far with such a load, he kept his place, but bitterly repented so doing, when in its blind panic his strange steed plunged into the chasm, at whose bottom they landed with a terrific shock that rendered him unconscious.

How long he lay in that condition he had no idea, but when he did regain his senses and tried to move, he realized that he was helpless and that death stared him in the face, unless he was found by some of his companions.

How Hercules had lost his trail now became clear. The good dog had followed it truly enough up to the point where Bunty became an involuntary passenger on the stag's back. Then of course he was at fault, and if the Goorkha had not been able to make a response to the shouting of the searchers, he might have lain at the bottom of the chasm until death claimed him.

"You've had a remarkably narrow escape, my man," said Colonel Stannard to him gravely, "and I trust it will teach you not to be so reckless in future," which Bunty penitently promised to remember.

As they were not far from the city of Tolon-Noor, it was thought best to push on to it as rapidly as

possible, Bunty being carefully disposed on the back of a camel. They accordingly left the forest behind and pressed forward steadily until they came in sight of the huge aggregation of hideous houses which comprised the city, and were dominated by the glittering gilt roofs of two enormous lamaseries that stood out above all the other buildings. Here they halted, while Colonel Stannard, Kent, and Tokoura went on ahead to secure accommodation.

Their first impressions of this great commercial centre were far from pleasing. The streets were narrow, tortuous, and so crowded with men, animals, and goods that progression through them was a matter of difficulty, demanding much patience. Moreover, the roadway was simply a marsh of mud and putrid filth, deep enough to smother the smaller beasts of burden that not infrequently fell down in it to die, leaving their rotting carcasses to add to the abominable stench. On either side ran a narrow, rugged, slippery footpath, wide enough only for one person, so that when two met upon it, one had to step into the mud to allow the other to pass.

“What a dreadful place this is!” exclaimed Kent in disgust, as their horses laboured through the quagmire streets by a series of exhausting plunges. “And did you ever know such a smell? Hadn’t we better camp outside and send in for whatever we want?”

“Oh, this is nothing when you’re used to it,” responded his father, laughing. “We’ll find good quarters soon where Bunty can lay up comfortably

until he's all right again, and it is for that purpose we've come here."

They were fortunate in having so experienced a guide as Tokoura, else they might have wandered through these frightful streets for a long time ere discovering what they sought. But he led the way to an inn, which was a fair specimen of its kind, where they put up their animals and secured accommodation for their whole party.

"Now, then," said Colonel Stannard, "let us see what we can do for dinner."

A curious triangular flag, floating before a house in the next street, indicated an eating-house, and they repaired thither with expectant appetites. Passing through a long passage, they entered a spacious apartment containing a number of small tables, quite after the manner of a French *café*.

"Why, this looks nice," cried Kent. "I hope they've got something good to put on the tables."

"You'll see presently," said his father, as they seated themselves. "Here comes the waiter with the teapot."

A large pot of boiling hot tea was then set before them.

"But I don't want to begin with tea," protested Kent. "I prefer to wind up with it."

"You will have to, notwithstanding," responded the colonel, smiling, "for you won't get a bite from them until you do. They will serve nothing until the teapot has been duly honoured."

"Oh, very well, then, here goes," and making a

wry face, Kent emptied his cup, replacing it on the table with an emphatic bang that plainly meant, "There, now, bring on your grub."

The comptroller of the table now made his appearance, a personage of very elegant manners, who, after a torrent of words about things in general, at last announced the bill of fare and requested their opinion thereon.

As they made their selections, he repeated the items in a loud chant for the information of the "governor of the pot," who was listening attentively at the kitchen door.

The dinner was served with admirable promptitude, but ere they set to work upon it, Colonel Stannard rose, and to Kent's great surprise and no little concern, seeing that the table held no more than enough for their little party, he began to invite all the other guests present to partake.

"Come," he said, in his most engaging manner, "come, my friends, and drink a glass of wine with me. Come and eat a plate of rice," and so on, enumerating the different dishes before him. But, instead of there being a general movement in his direction, the invited ones simply rose and, bowing gratefully, replied :

"No, I thank you, honoured sirs. Do *you* rather come and seat yourselves at our table. It is we who invite you."

And there the matter ended, for by this formality they had all "manifested their honour" and were now free to devote themselves to their dinner.

The meal was a very fair one, and so much superior to the camp cooking they had been having of late that Kent felt in a much better frame of mind, and found the prospect of a stay at the inn not so objectionable as at first.

That afternoon they brought their whole party and possessions to the inn, and had poor Bunty made comfortable in a quiet corner where he could recover from his hurts in peace.

Despite the hideousness of the place itself, the sterility of the adjacent country, the excessive cold of the climate in winter and intolerable heat in summer, Tolon-Noor—"The Seven Lakes"—was a very important city, with a large population and an enormous commerce.

Hither came Russian merchandise in large quantities, by way of Kiatka; the Tartars brought in countless herds of camels, cattle, and horses to exchange for tobacco, tea, and linen goods; and the Chinese merchants, who held the whole trade in their hands, fleeced all the others impartially, usually making money enough in a few years to return to their own country with an independence.

The streets were always full of bustle; caravans constantly arriving or departing, all sorts of hawkers standing at the corners pressing their petty wares upon the passers-by, the shopkeepers from behind their counters tempting purchasers with honeyed words and pretended bargains, while the lamas, in their red and yellow robes, galloped up and down on fiery steeds, showing off their equestrian skill.

It was all very interesting to Kent, and he found the shops so seductive that he would have emptied his purse in them but for the fact that it would have been out of the question to carry away his purchases, seeing that henceforth no unnecessary baggage of any kind could be carried. He was fain, therefore, to put a strong curb on himself and to be content with looking at the pretty things and hearing their value enlarged upon by their vendors without adding them to his possessions.

CHAPTER XIII

IN PERIL AT THE FOUNDRY

TOLON-NOOR being celebrated for its foundries, from which not only all Tartary but the remotest districts of Tibet were supplied with the bronze idols, bells, and vases used in the worship of Buddha, Colonel Stannard arranged to spend a day in visiting these establishments.

“They do not welcome visitors very warmly and are particularly jealous about foreigners,” he told Kent, “but Tokoura has managed to obtain permission for us to go through a couple of the chief foundries, and when we have seen them, we shall have seen them all ; but I warn you, however, not to seem too curious, and not to ask many questions, or they will be sure to think you are trying to learn some of their secrets.”

“Oh, I’ll be mum as you like,” responded Kent. “They shall have no cause to suspect me.”

Under Tokoura’s wing they accordingly set out, and after a long, dirty tramp through the maze of filthy streets came to a gate in a high wall, at which Tokoura knocked in a modest manner. After some

delay it was slowly opened, and a parley took place, which Kent thought unduly prolonged, seeing that their visit was expected.

"What are they palavering about?" he exclaimed impatiently. "They knew we were coming and ought to be ready for us."

At last the gatekeeper ceased questioning, and in a grudging way opened the gate, admitting them to a large yard littered with *débris* and cinders, and containing in the centre a plain one-storied building, open at the side next them. In this were the furnaces for melting the bronze, and the moulds into which the molten metal was poured.

Tokoura told them that they had come at a particularly good time, as a most important casting was about to be made. "A very rich ruler of Oudcho-Mourdchin is having a splendid statue of Buddha made, which he will present to the Talé-lama at L'hasa," he exclaimed, "and they are now about to cast the head and shoulders. It will be the biggest piece of work they have ever done at the foundry, and, of course, they are very anxious about it."

Understanding this, the Stannards watched the proceedings with enhanced interest, the colonel saying to himself :

"And so this statue, when finished, is to go to L'hasa. I wonder will we ever succeed in reaching that mysterious place which has so strange and inexplicable an attraction for me?"

The mould being ready, and the bronze melted in the furnace to just the right point, the workmen,

under the direction of a very important-looking and sharp-speaking "boss," proceeded with the utmost care to draw off the glowing metal, which sent forth dazzling scintillations as it poured into the huge pot, by which it was carried to the mould, a group of lamas standing near and repeating rapidly an unintelligible prayer for the success of the operation.

Hitherto Kent had kept well in the background, but so beautiful was the glowing bronze and so eager was he to see its descent into the mould, that unconsciously he pressed forward until he got close behind the moulders, who were themselves too deeply engrossed in their work to notice his proximity.

The pot, which swung on a sort of travelling crane, having been brought over the mouth of the mould, and the lamas having put on extra pressure at their prayer mumbling, the pot was tipped, and a dazzling stream of what looked like burning gold proceeded forth.

The next instant there came a terrific explosion that filled the air with molten bronze and blinding dust, and hurled to the ground every one who stood near the spot.

A moment of appalled silence followed, and then the foundry was filled with confusion and uproar, the shrieks and groans of burned and blistered men, the angry shouts of the foremen, the panic-stricken outcries of the lamas—all these combined to make a pandemonium.

Colonel Stannard and Tokoura having kept a respectful distance from where the mould lay had

escaped unscathed. Not so, however, was it with Kent. He had been just behind the ring of workmen, and when the explosion took place, the man in front of him, who was unfortunate enough to receive a splash of the burning metal full in the face, fell back upon him so violently that he hurled him to the ground, Kent's head striking so hard against a block of wood that he lost consciousness.

In this condition Colonel Stannard found him, and, full of concern, carried him into the open air, where, to his immense relief, he soon regained his senses, his first question on coming to being :

“What's the matter? How did I get hurt?”

“The mould exploded and you had a narrow escape from being badly burned, my boy,” answered his father in a tone of deep tenderness. “No doubt water must have got into it. Several poor fellows have been seriously hurt, I fear.”

While he was speaking, they were suddenly surrounded by a crowd of workmen, whose threatening countenances and angry mutterings boded no good.

“Hello! Tokoura, what does this mean?” asked Colonel Stannard. “They look as if they meant mischief.”

Tokoura was not lacking in courage and had great faith in his own resources, yet now he was evidently in a state bordering upon panic.

“They blame you for what has happened,” he replied in a low tone, while he regarded the encircling mob apprehensively. “They think you used the evil eye and thus made the casting fail.”

"What utter nonsense!" exclaimed the colonel contemptuously. "Tell them how sorry we are at the accident, and that if they think we interfere, we will go away at once."

Tokoura did as he was bid, using the most gracious language he could command; but his honeyed words had no effect. The moulders were evidently in a very ugly mood, and intended to wreak vengeance upon the intruding foreigners for the failure of the casting and the consequent injuries to their fellow-workers. Seeing that Tokoura's words were without result, Colonel Stannard, with instinctive promptitude of decision, took action in a more definite way.

"Draw your revolvers," he said in a low tone to his companions, "and let us stand back to back so that they cannot get behind us."

The manœuvre was quickly and cleverly executed, and the astounded moulders the next moment found themselves confronted by the muzzles of three death-dealing weapons. They at once fell back in confusion, leaving a clear space, of which the veteran soldier was quick to take advantage.

"Now," he whispered, "move toward the gate as fast as you can without getting separated."

The three then began to retreat, but as soon as this was noticed, the crowd of workmen set up a shout, and one of them lifted his arm to throw a chunk of broken metal. That instant Colonel Stannard's revolver cracked, and with a howl of pain the arm fell and its owner rushed away in abject terror. The effect of the shot was to scatter the other men

like panic-stricken sheep, and the colonel called out:

“Now then, make a dart for the gate.”

The order was instantly obeyed, and before the moulders had recovered their wits, the three visitors were outside.

“Thank heaven,” panted Kent, when they had left the foundry far behind, “we got out of that place with whole skins! Who would have ever imagined we’d have to run such risks, first of being blown up, and then of being mobbed by a lot of ruffians like those? This certainly is a queer country.”

“It is that, Kent,” responded his father, “and we have a still queerer country and people ahead of us. But we must only trust in Providence and our own wits to bring us safely through.”

By the following day Bunty was sufficiently recovered from his injuries to take the saddle again, and so the little caravan once more got in motion, all its members being glad to exchange the confusion and the filth of the city for the peace and purity of the open country.

The first part of their journey was very monotonous and wearisome, the road, if such it could be called, running through an apparently interminable series of small hills, composed of fine moving sand, over which it was impossible to progress at a faster pace than a walk.

As they proceeded, however, the country improved, and in a few days they reached the plains of the “Red Banner,” the finest province in the whole

Tchakar district. This rich region, which stretched from the great wall to the borders of the empire, was entirely devoted to the pasturing of the emperor's vast flocks and herds, the Tartar inhabitants being all paid soldiers, who had to be ready for military service on the shortest notice, and in the meantime performed the duties of keepers of the imperial cattle.

The travellers found these herdsmen always very kindly disposed, and as hospitable as it was in their power to be. They had under their care huge droves of camels, horses, cattle, and sheep, whose numbers seemed beyond computation. Yet every animal was reckoned, and at certain intervals there would come inspectors-general to examine the herds and see to it that the full count was on hand, otherwise the Tartar in charge had to make up the deficiency at his own cost.

Tokoura, with an unction that showed how clever he considered their conduct, told how, in spite of this rigid and regular inspection, the Mongols managed to make profit out of their position in the following way :—Whencever a Chinese had a broken-winded horse or a sick ox, he hastened with it to the imperial herdsmen, who, upon receipt of a small sum, would allow him to select another animal in exchange, leaving his own behind to fill the place so that there should be no shortage.

The weather was splendid as they traversed those plains, and Kent found the life a most welcome change after what they had been experiencing. The herdsmen's camps were full of interest for him.

They would come upon them on the choice spots by the water-side, where the pasturage was richest: a group of tents, looking for all the world like balloons newly inflated and just about to take their flight into the air; children of all sizes, running about with a sort of little hod upon their backs collecting the dried dung, which was the only fuel; the mothers busy at their domestic tasks; and the fathers mounted on handsome horses, riding about, carrying long poles, with which they controlled the vast herds that roamed hither and thither over the boundless plain.

CHAPTER XIV

A TARTAR FOX HUNT

“WOULDN’T it be fine if it was like this all the way to L’hasa,” Kent exclaimed, as they rode rapidly along over the smooth, soft turf.

“Yes, indeed,” responded his father heartily; “but if that were the case, there would be far more travellers making the journey, and no particular credit in accomplishing it, would there?”

“That’s so,” replied Kent. “The harder it is, the more we’ll have to be proud of if we succeed, which, of course, we shall. I haven’t much doubt on that score.”

“God knows,” said the colonel gravely. “Sometimes I feel like blaming myself for ever having undertaken such an enterprise, and am tempted to give it up and turn back.”

“Oh, don’t think of such a thing,” cried Kent in a tone of apprehension. “We must go right through with it now. It would be dreadful to turn back after having gone this far.”

“You need not be alarmed, my boy,” was the reassuring reply. “It’s not according to my nature

to withdraw from what I've once committed myself to. We shall go ahead until we can go no farther, and retreat only when it is clear that it is impossible to advance."

They were often invited by the herdsmen to visit their tents, and accepted the invitation.

The Tartar tent was a curious structure, admirably adapted to the wandering life of the people. It had a framework of wooden bars and poles trellised together at the bottom, and meeting at the top like the ribs of an umbrella. Upon these was stretched a thick covering of waterproof cloth, and then the tent was completed. In shape, as already described, it closely resembled the upper part of a balloon, and it afforded a very comfortable shelter from the wind and cold. The interior was divided into two apartments, one for the men, the other for the women, this latter constituting the kitchen of the establishment.

A visit to these people was a very simple affair, altogether exempt from the minute and tiresome formalities in vogue among the Chinese.

Having crept through the low door, the visitors gave the word of peace—"amor," or "*mendan*"—to the company generally, and then seated themselves on the right of the head of the family, who was squatting on the floor opposite the entrance. Snuff-bottles having been produced and social pinches interchanged, the conversation began :

"Sirs, where is your country?" the host would inquire.

"We come from the West," Colonel Stannard would reply.

"Through what countries have your beneficial shadows passed?"

"We have last come from Tolon-Noor."

"Has peace accompanied your progress?"

"Hitherto we have journeyed in all tranquillity."

Having thus answered, the colonel would take up the questioning:

"Is the pasturage with you rich and abundant? Are your herds in fine condition? Are your cattle productive? Does peace prevail?" and so on, this interchange being conducted with the utmost gravity on both sides until the mistress of the tent appeared with the refreshments, which consisted of scalding tea, accompanied by butter, grated millet, and bits of cheese, set out in odd little boxes of polished wood that did duty as plates.

When their hosts wished to show special hospitality, they produced a bottle of Mongol wine, which had been warmed on the ashes. This was the famous *koumis*, prepared from skimmed milk that had been subjected to a process of fermentation and then distilled through a rude alembic. The Stannards found it very insipid and took as little as possible, but Tokoura relished it immensely.

In the course of one of these visits the conversation came to be about hunting, and Colonel Stannard made a number of inquiries, from which he learned that these herdsmen were keen hunters; going out with their guns and bows after the roebucks, deer,

and pheasants which were to be found, if sought in the right place. They also mentioned foxes, and Kent, innocently enough supposing that they would treat them as they did the other animals, asked :

“ The foxes, do you shoot or trap them ? ” for he knew that the Chinese were very fond of trapping Reynard for the sake of his skin.

Great was his surprise, then, when a famous hunter of the “ Red Banner,” who was in the company, drew himself up proudly and, with an injured tone in his voice, replied :

“ No, indeed, we never trap the foxes. That is for the Chinese to do. We set about the thing in an honest way. When we see a fox, we set off after him and gallop until we have run him down.”

“ I beg your pardon,” instantly responded Kent. “ That, of course, is the right way, and you are true sportsmen. What fun you must have. I’d like so much to have a run after a fox with you. Wouldn’t you, father ? ” turning to the colonel with an entreating look in his eager face.

The colonel’s countenance kindled. It had been many years since he had followed the hounds in the beloved home-land, and the idea of a genuine fox hunt on the plains of Tartary was very attractive.

“ I believe I would, Kent,” he smilingly answered. “ Perhaps it could be arranged. We can stay here for a day or two.”

“ Hurrah ! ” cried Kent, springing up. “ That’s splendid. Now, Tokoura, you explain to them just what we want and we’ll get the thing arranged.”

Tokoura had no difficulty in doing this. The herdsmen were only too glad of an excuse to break the monotony of their occupation, and several of them at once saddled up and rode out to explore the country and ascertain where foxes were to be found.

Bright and early the next morning the fox hunters started off, everybody in high spirits, and Kent the most jubilant of them all. His own horse being better adapted for steady travelling than for short spurts at top speed, the chief herdsman had kindly loaned him a handsome little black mare, without a white hair upon her, whose shape showed every indication of speed, while her spirit left nothing to be desired.

Colonel Stannard was provided with a big brown stallion, well up to his weight, but Tokoura, Champ, and Bunty had to be content with their own mounts.

Setting off at an easy trot, with the dogs bounding and barking about the horses' heels, Hercules alone maintaining a dignified silence as he moved along close to Kent, they rode for several miles due south until they reached the edge of a small valley, such as in the Western States would be called a *coulée*. It was thickly grown with stunted trees, and the moment Kent looked into it, he exclaimed :

"What a perfect covert! There are sure to be foxes in there."

It certainly seemed just the place for Reynard to make his retreat, and the Tartars evidently had no doubt of the game they sought being on hand.

The object being to get a fox out on the open, several of the men dismounted, and, calling to their dogs, proceeded to beat the covert in a systematic way that showed they knew their business.

All aquiver with expectation, the Stannard party disposed themselves on the level ground in readiness for a start the instant the fox appeared.

With shouting of men and barking of dogs the beat proceeded. The minutes passed and yet no glimpse of red fur did the excited watchers get.

“Bless my heart,” murmured Kent impatiently; “surely that covert is not going to be drawn blank. It ought to be just full of foxes.”

He had hardly spoken when out from the trees and up the valley-side sprang a fox whose size fairly took his breath away. Not until it reached the upper level did it perceive the waiting horsemen, and then, giving a sharp bark of surprise, it went off at a tangent, heading straight across the plain.

With a roar like that of a bull, Hercules hurled himself after the fleeing animal, closely followed by the Stannards and the rest of the party. Away they flew over the fairly even ground, their mounts being quite as much in the spirit of the thing as they were themselves.

Kent found his little mare a perfect beauty to ride. She moved with an easy, regular stride that made it a delight to be in the saddle, and her pace was such that he had no fear of her being left in the rear as long as she could keep it up.

On they galloped across the rolling plain, the chief

herdsman, who rode a splendid white horse, Colonel Stannard, and Kent being in the van, while Tokoura, Champ, Bunty, and a number of the Tartars tailed out behind them. Barring mishaps, it was not difficult to guess between whom the honour of being in at the death lay.

Hercules showed amazing speed for so large a dog, keeping well in sight of the fox, despite the latter's frantic efforts to distance him.

After running in almost a straight line for about half-a-mile, the fox suddenly changed his course and steered for a range of low hills that rose on the right.

"He's making for covert," cried Kent. "We must head him off."

So saying, he gave his mare the whip, to which she responded with a spurt that put her in the lead.

"Take care, Kent," Colonel Stannard called out. "The ground's getting rough. Watch where you're going."

"All right, sir," answered Kent, still urging on his horse and striving to cut the fox off from his line of retreat.

But in this, earnest as his effort was, he did not succeed, for wily Master Reynard, letting out another link of speed, reached the hillside first and vanished in a gully that was filled with shrubbery.

"Checked," exclaimed Kent in a tone of deep disgust, "and right in the middle of such a splendid run. What a nuisance."

"It is too bad," said his father, who had just come

up. "We have to wait now until the dogs rout the rascal out, if they can."

Not only the dogs but their Tartar owners now entered the covert and beat their way through it, while the rest of the party kept a sharp look-out for the fox. Colonel Stannard was the first to sight him as he slyly crept away on the southern side.

"Yoicks, tally-ho!" he shouted. "He's gone away," and, clapping spurs to his horse, he led the chase, with Kent at his shoulder and the others following close.

Then ensued such a run as falls to the lot of few fox hunters. Reynard, refreshed by his rest in the shrubbery, steered straight across the plain, and the horses, having also benefited by the halt, galloped after him in glorious style, while their riders shouted at them and to one another in the exuberance of their excitement.

For some distance the hunters kept fairly well together, but then the pace began to tell and the cavalcade to tail off, those having the poorer mounts dropping more and more to the rear until, at last, only a quartette remained in the lead—Colonel Stannard, Kent, the Tarter chief, and Tokoura. Between these four a tacit rivalry had sprung up, and each one was resolved that the others should not outstrip him, if he could possibly prevent it.

As they rattled on, the character of the going changed. The turf gave way to hard ground, sprinkled with stones, and gullies appeared, which had to be leaped across.

Kent's mare proved a rarely good jumper. She took off splendidly, and landed so lightly that to clear a ten-foot-wide gully seemed nothing to her. The chief's big white horse did equally well, but Colonel Stannard's and Tokoura's were both inclined to balk, and they accordingly began to lose ground, falling behind until it became clear that, barring accidents, the race for the brush lay between Kent and the chief herdsman.

Realizing this, they settled down in their saddles with looks of grim determination in their countenances, each one vowing to himself that he would take any chance rather than allow the other to beat him.

CHAPTER XV

KENT WINS THE BRUSH

THE ground grew rougher and rougher, but with amazing cleverness the mare and stallion got over it, although both occasionally stumbled, and would have gone down had they carried less skilful riders.

Hercules, having distanced all the other dogs, still hung on to the fox with fine persistence. He was feeling the killing pace, but so too was the quarry, and the chances of his lasting to the end of the run were still good enough.

At last Reynard's speed began to slacken. His head and tail drooped, and his stride lost its spring.

"Hurrah!" panted Kent, "he's weakening. We'll soon be up to him. Forward, Herc, forward!"

Hercules strove to respond to the appeal, and did gain a few yards. The end of the chase was drawing near. With an exultant smile the Tartar chief rose in his stirrups and lashed his horse with his heavy whip.

The poor creature, stung by the cruel thong, sprang forward blindly, and slipping upon some loose stones came down with a crash, hurling its rider headlong to

the hard ground where he struck with terrible force and lay motionless.

Kent could not stop then to help him, for Hercules was just closing in upon the exhausted fox.

“Father will look after him,” he muttered by way of justifying himself as he guided his mare over the broken ground.

The finish was now very near. Poor Reynard could hardly lift his tired feet, and Hercules was hardly less exhausted. Calling on his game little steed for a final effort, Kent got up behind the mastiff just as the big fellow, with one last supreme spurt, threw himself on the fox and bore him to the earth. There was a brief struggle, a vicious snapping and snarling, and then Reynard lay still while Hercules stood over him wagging his tail in triumph.

“Well done, old dog,” panted Kent as, leaping from the saddle, he patted his huge pet warmly. “We’ve won the brush, haven’t we? and I am proud of it, I tell you. I wonder how the poor chief is that came such a cropper. Come, let us see.” Throwing the dead fox across the saddle he walked slowly back over the way he had come, and found his father and Tokoura attending to the chief, who was just regaining his senses.

“So you ran the rascal down after all, Kent,” said the colonel beaming upon his son, “and you were the only one in at the death. What good luck you do have!”

“It’s my good little mare that deserves all the credit,” responded Kent, as he stroked her nose

affectionately. "She's a wonder at getting over rough ground. I want you to buy her for me, father; won't you?"

Colonel Stannard laughed.

"I quite expected you'd be asking me that when I saw you sailing off on her back in such fine style," he said. "She certainly seems a very clever little creature, and I will make some inquiry as to her price."

"Oh, thank you, father," responded Kent, who knew that the mare was as good as his already. "I shall be so proud to own her."

By this time the chief, who had only been stunned, was sufficiently recovered to remount, and they all rode back to the camp, which they reached long after midday, thoroughly tired and exceedingly hungry, yet quite well satisfied with their first experience of a fox hunt on the plains of Tartary.

Resuming their journey the next morning, the purchase of the mare having to Kent's great joy been satisfactorily arranged, they kept on steadily for several days without anything noteworthy occurring, and then in the midst of an utter solitude they came upon an extraordinary thing—to wit, a large city absolutely abandoned and lifeless.

There it lay upon the plain, its turreted ramparts, its elevated watch-towers, its four great gates, facing the four points of the compass, all in perfect preservation, except that besides being half-buried in the dust that had drifted over them, they were also covered with a thick coating of turf.

It was with feelings of mingled awe and sadness that the Stannards rode through the silent streets of this strange monument of a mysterious past.

“Who are the people that lived here and what became of them?” were Kent’s very natural inquiries.

But the colonel could not tell him, and Tokoura knew nothing. From the fact that there were no ruins it was evident that the city had not been besieged and laid waste, and the inhabitants all put to the sword.

Whatever could have been the cause of its abandonment the thing had been deliberately done, and the city left intact to be slowly covered with wind-borne soil and buried beneath a winding-sheet of turf.

Roaming through the empty streets they found a young Mongol shepherd pasturing a flock of goats in what had once, no doubt, been a beautiful garden, and him they questioned as to the history of the deserted city.

But they might as well have applied to his goats for information. He knew nothing save that the place was called the Old Town, and that within its enclosures better pasturage could be had than out on the plain.

Not long after leaving the Old Town they had another surprise, for they came to a broad, well-kept road that seemed singularly out of place in that vast wilderness.

“Why, what is this, Tokoura?” Colonel Stannard inquired. “I did not expect to find so excellent a

road away out here. Whence does it come, and whither does it lead?"

Tokoura's usually sombre countenance lit up with a smile of pleasing recollection, for he knew the road right well, and had travelled it again and again.

"This," said he, "is the Road of the Emperor's Daughter."

"The Road of the Emperor's Daughter!" repeated the colonel. "How did it get that name and how far does it go?"

"It was so named," replied Tokoura, "because it was made for the passage of a princess who had been given in marriage by one of the Celestial emperors to a king of the Khalkas, and it goes all the way to Kiaktha."

"You don't mean to say so!" exclaimed the colonel; "and this is the famous Kiaktha road, whereby the Russian traders come to Peking. I wish we had as good a road to L'hasa."

Tokoura had so much to say about Kiaktha, the town which had centuries before by treaty between the emperor and the czar been established as an *entrepot* of the trade between Russia and China, that Kent's interest was deeply aroused.

"I wish we had time to go there first," he said.

"Why, my boy, that would take us several months," said his father with a laugh, "and it is quite out of the question. Perhaps some time in the future we may make that trip."

Regretfully leaving the well-made Kiaktha road

they continued on their own rough route, and by the end of the week came to the district of Efe, a portion of the territory of the Eight Banners.

Here they halted for a couple of days to rest their animals, and Kent was greatly amused by watching the play of some children, whose principal amusement seemed to be wrestling. He came upon one group of youthful athletes who were engaged in this exercise, and who went at it harder than ever when they saw they were being observed.

The biggest of the party, a boy not more than ten years old, showed remarkable dexterity and strength, picking up one of his playmates, a chubby fellow, nearly his own height, and tossing him up and down as though he were a mere featherweight. It really looked dangerous, but he repeated the performance several times amid the applauding cries of his companions.

"These people are famous wrestlers," Tokoura said. "They are Mongol Khalkas, and are trained to it from the time they can stand alone," and then he proceeded to tell how every year the best of them are sent down to Peking to compete in the public wrestling matches, at which they usually carry off a number of prizes.

He had also a good story to relate. It seemed that one time there came out of Efe a wrestler who vanquished all opponents, whether Chinese or Tartar. He was of gigantic proportions, and his huge hands were like grappling-irons. No sooner did his rival stand before him than he seized him round the waist,

lifted him right over his head, and hurled him to the ground, oftentimes with broken bones.

He had vanquished all comers, and was about to be awarded the principal prize, when a new challenger entered the ring, amid the jeers of the spectators, who were lost in amazement at the man's audacity.

He was a Chinese of only medium height and meagre frame, showing no sign whatever of special strength or agility, and the unconquered giant gazed at him with mingled astonishment and contempt.

"What are you doing here?" he snorted disdainfully. "You are fit only to wrestle with children, not with men! See, I will throw you with only one hand!" and he advanced toward his diminutive antagonist.

But the latter, showing no fear, stood his ground, and just as the giant was about to grasp him, he squirted into his face a lot of water he had been holding in his mouth.

The Tartar, naturally enough, put up his hands to wipe the water away, and at that instant the astute Chinaman rushed in, caught the other around the waist, and threw him over before he had time to recover himself, while the spectators laughed and cheered at the success of his clever stratagem.

Being curious to see some examples of their skill, Kent asked Tokoura to arrange for an exhibition, which he had no difficulty in doing, as the Mongols were only too glad to show off before the foreigners.

The performance took place on a smooth plot of

turf near the Stannards' camp, and was attended by a large number of the people of the place.

It began with matches between small boys, which were both interesting and amusing, the youngsters showing much agility and adroitness in foiling one another's efforts and striving to gain a decisive advantage.

After them came the young men, whose contests were very exciting ; and finally the veterans, whose struggles for supremacy wrought the spectators up to fever pitch.

As Kent watched the proceedings he became possessed with a desire to enter the ring himself, and see what sort of a showing he would make against one of his own size.

But on mentioning it to his father the colonel at once put in his veto.

“No, no,” he said so decidedly that Kent knew it was useless urging the matter. “It would be lowering yourself to do that ; I could not think of allowing you.”

“Well, do you mind if Champ or Bunty have a try ?” asked Kent. “They are both as strong as any of these fellows, and perhaps they could hold their own against them.”

“I have no objections if they are willing,” answered the colonel. “They can both take good care of themselves.”

On the matter being proposed to the Sikh and Goorkha, they promptly acquiesced, and through Tokoura's intermediation a match was at once arranged to take place that afternoon.

When the time came the entire population seemed to gather to the spectacle, and, of course, the whole of Colonel Stannard's party were on hand, occupying good positions on one side of the arena.

With much formality, and the interchange of many polite though meaningless phrases, the conditions were agreed upon.

Colonel Stannard and the chief man of the place were to be joint judges. There was to be absolutely no interference, except, of course, of a vocal nature, on the part of the spectators, and the challengers should each be allowed three trials, if they so desired.

Bunty was the first to appear as the representative of the visitors, and he certainly presented a very promising appearance as he sprang into the ring.

He wore only a pair of short breeches, and from his neck to his waist the muscles showed in lumps and ridges under his dark skin, while his long arms looked as though they were hard as iron. His squat figure was set so strongly on his slightly bowed legs that evidently no ordinary effort would avail to overset it, and as he stood there, the alert, intelligent, resolute expression of his countenance commanded confidence in his readiness and richness of resource. A minute later his opponent appeared.

He was taller than Bunty and more loosely built, but his frame showed splendid development, and his movements bespoke both agility and power.

Eyeing one another keenly they waited the signal to commence.

CHAPTER XVI

THE WRESTLING MATCH AT EFE

THE chief man gave the word, and at once the two antagonists started to circle about each other warily, seeking an opening. The wrestling was of the catch-as-catch-can style, and a great deal depended upon the getting of a good hold at the start. The two men vividly suggested a pair of panthers as with lithe, noiseless movements, and intent gleaming eyes they glided this way and that, while the spectators held their breath, and quivered with excitement. At last the Mongol darted forward, threw his arms about Bunty, and the struggle had begun.

Swaying to and fro the wrestlers put forth all their skill and strength against each other, and it was at once evident that they were very evenly matched, Bunty making up in solidity what he lacked in stature. The minutes went by, and still neither gained any advantage, although at first one and then the other seemed about to win a fall.

Kent, carried away by excitement, strove to inspire Bunty by shouts of appeal to special effort, or of advice as to what device to try. But he might as

well have spared his lungs, for Bunty was too deeply absorbed in his work to either hear or heed. The bout had continued full ten minutes, and both men were beginning to tire, when Bunty in attempting to change his hold gave the Mongol an advantage that he did not fail to seize. With a grunt of exultation he put all his remaining strength into a tremendous effort, and, despite his fierce opposition, Bunty was whirled around, and flung backward, both shoulders striking the ground full and fair.

Then burst forth from the victor's people an ear-splitting chorus of triumphant yells, amid which Bunty picked himself up, and retreated scowling to his own party.

Disappointed, but not disheartened, by the result, big Champ now went forward, and as the natives looked at his stalwart figure with its mighty bone and sinew a murmur of admiration came from their crowded ranks.

"You must win this bout, Champ," said Kent in a tone of mingled appeal and command, which Colonel Stannard emphasized by adding, "Our honour is in your hands now, so do your best, Champ." The Sikh's opponent was a larger man than the one who had defeated Bunty, yet the former stood a head taller, and must have weighed a score of pounds more.

But the Khalka carried himself with a confident air that bespoke a long record of victories, and by the approving murmur which came from his compatriots it was easy to see that they entertained little doubt

as to the issue of the contest. There was a notable difference in the way this pair began operations. They did not dodge around the circle each watching for the chance to take the other at a disadvantage, but they stood right up to each other in the centre of the ring, and after a second or two of dignified feinting came to close quarters simultaneously.

With their long, dark arms wrapped about one another's bodies they presented a splendid picture of strength in action, and Kent's face grew tense and white with anxiety as he followed every movement of their straining forms.

"Won't it be dreadful if Champ loses this?" he exclaimed in an apprehensive tone. "There'll be no use trying any more."

"I don't think Champ is going to lose," said his father reassuringly. "He will make it a draw at any rate."

The stalwart Sikh was certainly making a good fight of it. Despite every artifice of the wily Mongol he held his ground firmly, and a close observer could not fail to notice that while his strength seemed unabated his antagonist betrayed signs of tiring.

"Ah, I think I see what Champ is up to," said Kent presently in an easier tone. "He's going to wear that fellow out, and then do what he likes with him."

When the natives saw that their champion was having so hard a time they strove to encourage him by shrill cries and ear-splitting shouts, upon which Kent, not to be outdone, sprang to his feet, and

getting as near the wrestlers as he could, yelled to Champ with all the power of his lungs, in which action he was seconded by Bunty, while Colonel Stannard sat still and smiled serenely at their excitement.

The struggle went on for nearly a quarter of an hour, neither man gaining any marked advantage, and not only the Mongol, but Champ also, showed signals of distress.

Their breathing grew laboured, their eyes blood-shot, and foam gathered on their lips. Manifestly they had not spared themselves in the fierce contest for supremacy.

“Now, Champ, now!” cried Kent, rushing impetuously forward, and giving the Sikh a clap on the shoulder. “Try it now.”

Champ both heard and felt his young master, and the call inspired him to a supreme effort into which he put the last remnant of his strength. For a full minute of thrilling suspense the two athletes swayed this way and that while the issue trembled in the balance, and the spectators forgot to shout in the intensity of their feeling. Then the Mongol began to bend slowly backward, and the stern expression of the Sikh’s swarthy countenance was lightened with a gleam of triumph as he continued to press his opponent down.

The native spectators, seeing their representative’s peril, broke forth again in strenuous shouts. But they were of no avail. Champ had victory in his hands. Steadily, surely he bore down on the Mongol, and at

last with a despairing groan the latter went over on his back, with the blood spurting from his nostrils to show how terrible was the strain he had been enduring.

"Well done, Champ! Well done, old fellow!" shouted Kent, thumping the Sikh heartily on the back. "You've saved our credit and we're all proud of you."

"We are indeed, Champ," added Colonel Stannard, holding out his hand to him, which the big fellow shyly took. "Honours are even now, at all events."

But Bunty was not content to leave them in that way. He must needs attempt to redeem his reputation, and insisted upon having another round with his opponent.

The Mongol was nothing loth, and so they entered the ring again, the one burning with passion to re-establish his honour, the other smugly confident of repeating his success. The struggle between them was of longer duration this time, for Bunty put his whole being into it, and the native found the utmost of his skill and strength unavailing.

The minutes went by amid breathless excitement on the part of the spectators. Again and again it seemed as if first one and then the other must win. But by a desperate effort his antagonist would evade the fall that appeared inevitable.

At length when in both human nature had been taxed to the extreme limit of endurance, the Mongol's grip for an instant relaxed, and like a flash Bunty secured a hold that gave him the advantage he had

been seeking. For one thrilling instant the Mongol quivered on his feet, and then up he went into the air over Bunty's head and down in a heap upon the ground, which he struck so hard as to have the breath driven out of him.

How the Stannard party rejoiced, and how glum the natives looked at the result!

Bunty, with the broadest of grins on his swarthy countenance, received the hearty congratulations of his friends, while his defeated opponent, when he had recovered his wind, slunk off dejectedly, evidently having no stomach for a third trial.

So, with the advantage on the side of the visitors, the wrestling came to an end, and was followed by a feast in the Mongol fashion, of which Colonel Stannard and Kent partook very sparingly, as they had not yet got used to the native fare.

Bidding farewell to the good people of Efe, who had so hospitably entertained them, the travellers continued their way eastward, and presently reached a range of hills whose sides were covered with forests of fir and birch, that presented a pleasing contrast to the treeless monotony of the Tartar plains. They also afforded abundant fuel, and all of the party keenly relished the glorious fires they were able to have at night when the cold was most severe.

"It's a pity we can't have this all the way," remarked Kent, as he warmed himself before the leaping flames. "Those miserable argols make no sort of a blaze."

"And yet we may be thankful if we can always

get enough of them when we're crossing the deserts that are ahead of us, my lad," said Colonel Stannard, "for, lacking them, we can have no fire at all."

The argols, as they are called by the natives, were the droppings of the cattle dried by the sun, until they would burn in a dull, slow way, but giving out a great heat.

They constituted the only fuel in the treeless regions of Tartary and Tibet, and but for them many districts would be deserted altogether.

Some days after leaving Efe the caravan encountered a most singular-looking procession which greatly aroused their curiosity. It was where the road ran through a valley, and just in the middle of it they met two large chariots drawn by three oxen apiece. To each chariot were chained twelve huge dogs of the mastiff kind, eight at the sides and four in the rear, ferocious creatures, whose open mouths revealed terrible teeth that seemed ravening for blood. The chariots were laden with small, square boxes painted a bright red, and marked with curious characters in some unknown language.

Accompanying this extraordinary equipage, if so it might be called, were some twenty or more mounted men of a different appearance from any the travellers had hitherto met.

Discreetly drawing aside, so as to give them the right of way, the Stannards regarded them with the liveliest interest, but could ask no questions of them, for that would not only be a flagrant breach of etiquette,

but would render the questioners liable to the suspicion of having some evil designs.

Hercules bristled and barked angrily, but had the good sense to make no further demonstration, and, when commanded by Kent, lay down at his feet, although the deep growls that he emitted showed how much he was disturbed at the strange spectacle.

"What does it all mean, Tokoura?" Kent eagerly inquired. "Have you any idea?"

Now as a matter of fact, the guide was completely nonplussed, but to confess his ignorance would be to lose prestige in the party, so with that wise look which he knew so well how to assume, he replied:

"These came from a far country—far away beyond the great Gobi desert, and they bear presents to the Celestial Emperor."

It was a bow drawn at a venture on his part, but it chanced to make a very good shot, for such indeed was the explanation of this remarkable outfit, as Colonel Stannard learned subsequently from a lama of whom he made inquiry.

They were still making their way through this hilly region, when Kent, who loved to ride on ahead of the caravan, whose slow progress tried his patience, had an adventure that taught him a lesson of prudence.

Mounted on his black mare, of which he had grown extremely fond, and accompanied by Hercules, he had ridden on in advance for a mile or more, when on the top of a ridge just before him there appeared an enormous gray wolf, at sight of which Hercules gave a fierce bark, and rushed forward.

The wolf stood his ground until the mastiff got quite close to it, and then wheeling about, set off at a long, easy lope down the other side of the ridge.

“After him, Hercules, after him!” cried Kent, at once possessed with the passion of the chase. “Pull him down, good dog !”

The noble creature needed no urging. The sight of his arch-enemy was sufficient to inspire him to his utmost efforts, and he pursued him with great leaps and bounds that bade fair soon to bring him within reach.

CHAPTER XVII

AT CLOSE QUARTERS WITH WOLVES

PUTTING his mare to the highest speed that the rough nature of the ground permitted, Kent followed Hercules as he followed the wolf, and thus they came to a little valley where, to the boy's astonishment not unmixed with dismay, were two other wolves quite as large as the one he had been chasing. These showed no signs of turning tail on his approach, but on the contrary stood their ground firmly, and, the first one having joined them, the three great grim creatures made a group of antagonists that gave even the lion-hearted Hercules pause.

He stopped short in his stride, and when Kent came up, stood beside the panting mare, growling thunderously and showing his tremendous teeth, but making no motion toward using them.

Kent was for the moment completely taken aback. He had never expected anything like this, and he knew not how to deal with so extraordinary a situation.

The wolves, on their part, seemed to feel thoroughly

at ease. They were in their own fastness. They had the advantage in numbers, and they evidently entertained no thought of turning tail before these rash intruders.

How Kent wished for Bunty at that moment. With him to help he would not have hesitated a moment, but alone he was not sure of being equal to the emergency.

Yet if he gave ground would not the wolves set upon him, anyway, and might he not therefore just as well begin the fight, trusting to come out conqueror?

Happily he had his revolver, and as he drew it from the holster, he said to himself:

"I know I'm taking a big risk, but here goes," and aiming at the biggest of the three wolves, he pulled the trigger.

The report startled his mare so that in her panic she dashed straight at the wolves. As it happened, she could not have done a better thing, for at the same moment the fierce creatures charged down upon her (Kent's bullet not inflicting a fatal wound on the one that received it), and she over-rode one of them, striking it with her fore feet and injuring it severely. Nor was Hercules remiss in doing his part. He too joined in the charge, and when the opposing forces met he hurled himself upon the third wolf, getting a good grip at the brute's throat, and holding on there like grim death in spite of its frantic struggles.

Thus all three, Kent, the mare, and the mastiff, had

drawn first blood, so to speak, and yet the wolves were not at all daunted.

On the contrary they forced the fighting, one of them springing so fiercely at the mare's head that the animal plunged and reared with such violence as finally to unseat Kent, who feared her falling over backward upon him.

Not only did she throw her rider, but she ran away from him, leaving him to face his foes on foot, and Kent now realized into how perilous a position his rashness had brought him.

There was nothing to fear from the wolf Hercules had seized. That fellow would soon be *hors de combat*, but the other two, although both wounded, had still plenty of fight left. As quickly as he could pull the trigger Kent fired his revolver at them, and thus kept them at bay for a few minutes ; but his own excitement and their rapid movements prevented him from taking any sort of aim, and although every bullet hit their gray bodies, not one reached a vital spot.

Matters were now nearing a crisis ; Kent could not much longer defend himself from the determined attacks of the two maddened brutes, and at any moment might be pulled down to be torn in pieces by their ravening teeth. He felt his own strength waning, and although with the butt of his revolver he had so far beaten back the wolves, the slightest slip or miss of his blow would give them the opening they sought.

“God help me,” he despairingly groaned. “I can't keep them off any longer.”

The words had just left his lips when there fell on his ears the rattle of a horse's hoofs over the stones, and then his father's voice rang out :

"All right, Kent. I'm here."

He was not an instant too soon, for one of the wolves had at last broken through the boy's guard and fastened his teeth in the collar of his coat, causing him to sway and stagger backward until it was evident he must be brought to the ground.

But the father's cheering shout recalled his strength, and with a supreme effort he broke loose from the brute and recovered his balance just as Colonel Stannard, dashing up, sent a well-aimed bullet through its breast, while with another equally good shot he broke the back of the second wolf, thus promptly disposing of both of Kent's assailants.

"Well, well, my son," he exclaimed. "You've been in a pretty tight place, haven't you? Whatever possessed you to try conclusions with such creatures as these? You may be thankful that I heard the report of your revolver, and judged that you must be in some sort of a scrape where my presence might be of advantage."

Kent blushed and laughed, and hastened to explain how it all came about.

"Oh, yes," smiled the colonel. "It's easy enough to understand. At the same time you really must be less enterprising, or some day you'll get into a hole out of which there'll be no rescuing you."

While they were talking Hercules had disposed of his wolf, and made the tale complete, and as they did



"One of the wolves . . . had fastened his teeth in the collar."

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not propose to do anything with the creatures they had killed, they left them where they lay.

"You had better get up behind me," said the colonel, "for your mare must be back with the caravan. She passed me on the full run."

Kent accordingly mounted, and they rode back to rejoin their party, where, sure enough, they found the little mare, her appearance in a panting condition and with an empty saddle having created a sensation, and made Champ and Bunty very anxious.

When Tokoura heard of the encounter with the wolves and its result, he at once dispatched a couple of the men to skin the creatures for his young master, wolf-skins being highly esteemed. Making steady progress, day after day, the caravan, leaving the district of the Eight Banners, passed through the fertile and well-cultivated lands of western Toumet, where the plenty and comfort that prevailed was a marked contrast to the poverty of the desert region they had just traversed, and so came to Kouï-Hoa-Tchen, or the Blue Town, a large and important place surrounded by lofty walls, and having a garrison of ten thousand Manchu Tartars.

They found the streets in a horrible condition, being nothing but deep sloughs of black, stinking mud, and it was an inexpressible relief when at last Tokoura led them to an inn rejoicing in the high-sounding title of "The Hotel of the Three Perfections," whose door bore the encouraging announcement that "transitory guests on horse or camel were entertained, and their affairs transacted with infallible success."

Here after much parleying accommodations were secured for the whole party, as a stay of several days was to be made.

"Tokoura tells me this is the best place to lay in a supply of furs and warm clothing for the winter that is ahead of us, Kent," said Colonel Stannard, "and the first thing to be done is to change some of our silver ingots into currency."

The following morning, accompanied by Tokoura, they set out for the money-changers, having been duly forewarned by their experienced guide that they would infallibly be cheated unless they were very careful.

Colonel Stannard had with him several small ingots of silver which he wished to change for sapeks, the little copper coins of which the Chinese currency mainly consisted, and choosing the most honest-looking of the money-changers, he made known his desire.

With his yellow countenance wreathed in smiles, the Chinaman produced his scales and proceeded to weigh the silver with great show of painstaking minuteness.

Now in dealing with their Tartar customers, who can count nothing beyond their beads, and are therefore easily cheated, the Chinese state the weights and price of the silver correctly enough, but grossly miscalculate the exchange to their own advantage, and this was precisely what the money-changer endeavoured to do with Colonel Stannard.

The weight shown by his scales was perfectly

correct, and the price he offered was, if anything, better than the ordinary rate of exchange, but when, after an ostentatiously careful use of the "*souan-pan*," the Chinese calculation table, the result was announced, Tokoura at once whispered that there was an error in the dealer's favour of a considerable amount.

With an air of perfect courtesy Colonel Stannard said: "This is an exchange office. You are the buyers, we are the sellers. You have made your calculation, we will now make ours. Pray oblige us with a pencil and a piece of paper."

"Nothing can be more just. You have enunciated a fundamental law of commerce," was the equally courteous response, and a writing-case was handed out.

Colonel Stannard, by a very brief calculation, showed a difference in his favour of a thousand sapeks.

"Superintendent of the bank," he said with a pleasant smile, "your *souan-pan* is in error by a thousand sapeks."

"Impossible!" exclaimed the Chinaman, in a tone of the most virtuous surprise. "Do you think that I have all of a sudden forgotten my *souan-pan*? Let me go over the calculation again," and he proceeded, with an air of great anxiety to be correct, to repeat the process. When he had done he looked up triumphantly.

"Yes, I knew I was right. See, brother," and he passed the machine to a colleague behind the counter,

who went over the calculation and confirmed the other's result.

But Colonel Stannard was not to be thus hoodwinked.

"Your *souan-pan* may make mistakes," he said with polite persistence, "but my figures cannot. It is impossible for them to err."

The money-changers now began to look very much embarrassed, and at this juncture a bystander, who had been listening to the argument, offered himself as an umpire.

"Let me see how I reckon it up," he said, and taking the *souan-pan* he worked out the calculation.

"The illustrious foreigner is correct," he announced as he returned the machine. "There is an error of a thousand sapeks." Thereupon the money-changer made Colonel Stannard a sweeping bow.

"Illustrious sir, your calculation is better than mine," he said, and he proceeded to count out the thousand sapeks.

"Oh, that is nothing," responded the colonel, gathering up the money. "No one is exempt from error, and now that we have agreed upon the right amount, let us be mutually content."

With such honeyed phrases must awkward situations be smoothed over in compliance with Chinese etiquette, lest the person compromised should suffer that which is above all things to be dreaded, not the detection of his wrong-doing, but what is called in Chinese phrase, the taking away of his face, in other words, the making public of his guilt, for among the Chinese, as

among the ancient Spartans, it is not the crime itself, but the exposure of it that confers disgrace.

After leaving the money-changers Tokoura told them a good story, showing how these rascals sometimes over-reached themselves by their own knavery. One day a Tartar presented himself with a "*youen-pas*" carefully packed and sealed. A "*youen-pas*" is an ingot of silver, the usual weight being fifty-two ounces.

On the money-changer unpacking and weighing it he announced that it only weighed fifty ounces.

"It weighs fifty-two ounces," protested the Tartar. "I weighed it just before I left home."

"Oh, your scales are good enough for sheep," sneered the Chinaman, "but they won't do for weighing silver."

After much haggling he had his way, and the Tartar, having just required a certificate of the weight and value of the ingot, took his sapeks and went off grumbling.

The money-changer was in high glee at his success, until on making a more careful examination of the ingot he, to his horror, discovered that it was not of silver, but of base bullion.

At once he raised the hue and cry after the Tartar, who presently was seized and brought before the mandarin.

Now the Tartar had committed a capital offence in passing off base metal for silver, yet he did not seem at all dismayed when put on trial. He flatly denied the charge, saying :

"The *youen-pas* that I sold was all pure silver. I am only a poor Tartar, and I cannot command words, but I pray you have the false ingot weighed."

It was accordingly weighed and found to contain fifty-two ounces.

The Tartar now drew from one of his boots a small parcel containing, carefully wrapped in rags, a piece of paper.

"Here," he said to the mandarin, "is the certificate they gave me when I changed my ingot."

The mandarin examined the paper with a knowing smile. "This certificate," he said, "is for an ingot weighing only fifty ounces, whereas the false one weighs fifty-two ounces. It cannot therefore be the Tartar's," whereupon he gave judgment in his favour, and condemned the money-changer to be punished.

"Capital!" cried Kent, laughing heartily. "Capital! That was a case of catching a Tartar, wasn't it?"

"The sacred proverb, 'He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it himself,' holds good even out in these remote regions, you see," said Colonel Stannard; "yet I'm afraid that it is not often that the biter is thus bitten. As a usual thing the Chinese get the best of every bargain they make with these poor, stupid Tartars."

CHAPTER XVIII

FROM THE BLUE TOWN TO THE YELLOW RIVER

THE Blue Town was notable for the number and size of its lamaseries, there being five great institutions, each containing more than two thousand lamas, and three times as many smaller establishments.

The lamasery of the Five Towers being the finest and most famous the Stannards paid it a visit, and were well received by the *hobligan*, that is, the grand lama, who was considered a very holy personage, being in fact an incarnation of Buddha.

Colonel Stannard had a long conversation with this dignitary, in the course of which he explained to him what the Christians' faith was, and to his surprise the lama maintained that the difference between their beliefs was not so very great.

"We hold," he said, smiling graciously, "that there is but one sole sovereign of the universe, the creator of all things, alike without beginning and without end."

"You say the Buddha is sole," replied the colonel, "and yet you have the Talé-lama of L'hasa, the

Kaldan of Tolon-Noor, the Guison-Tamba of the Grand Kouren, yourself, and others, who are all Buddhas. How is that? I cannot understand it."

"We are all equally Buddha," was the mystifying reply, given with the simple dignity of absolute assurance.

"So Buddha is sole, and yet there exists a number of Buddhas. He is a spirit and still has innumerable manifestations in flesh and blood. How do you explain all that?" argued Colonel Stannard.

"The doctrine I tell you is true," responded the grand lama, assuming an accent of high authority. "You of the far countries cannot understand it, for it is of unfathomable profundity. But it is the only true doctrine."

Realizing that theological controversy was as futile in Tartary as in Christendom, Colonel Stannard said no more on the subject, and after refreshments had been handed around the visitors took their leave, well pleased with their reception.

Having made many purchases of furs and thick clothing at the shops of the Blue Town, added half-a-dozen more camels to their caravan, and laid in a large stock of provisions, they extricated themselves with no little difficulty from the filthy, crowded streets, and were glad to be once more in the open country.

The road was good, and they made rapid progress over it, directing their course for the town of Tchagan-Kouren, or the White Enclosure, on the

banks of the Yellow River, where they would have to effect the crossing of that mighty and treacherous stream.

Toward sunset one afternoon they saw clouds of dust in the distance ahead of them, whence presently emerged a long line of camels heavily laden with goods for Peking.

On meeting the leading camel-driver Tokoura asked him how far it was to the town.

With a knowing grin the fellow answered:

"You see here the head of our caravan. Well, the end of it has not yet left the White Enclosure."

"Many thanks," responded Tokoura. "Then we have not much farther to go."

"No, not more than fifteen *lis*," said the driver, grinning still more widely. (There are three *lis* to an English mile.)

"Fifteen *lis*!" cried Tokoura incredulously. "Why, what do you mean? Haven't you just told me that the other end of your caravan is still in the town?"

"So it is," retorted the driver. "But our caravan consists of not less than ten thousand camels," and, so saying, he urged his camel forward, giving his questioner a parting leer as he moved off.

His statement proved to be no exaggeration. All that afternoon the huge procession of camels filed past, kicking up a most objectionable quantity of dust as well as tainting the whole atmosphere with the unpleasant pungent odour that emanated from their mis-shapen forms.

Their one redeeming feature was the Tibetan bells hung at their necks, which had a very sweet, silvery sound, and seemed to chime in an arranged harmony.

Their drivers were most unprepossessing-looking fellows. Wrapped from head to foot in skins they were placed between the humps of their camels just like bales of merchandise, and their ugly countenances, burned almost black by many months' exposure to the sun and wind of the Tartar deserts, betrayed not the slightest interest in the travellers, or if they deigned to look at them at all it was with an expression of sullen hostility.

"Did you ever see such a lot of curmudgeons?" Kent exclaimed, as the sulky fellows lumbered silently past. "They look as if they hadn't a friend in the world, and didn't want one either. I'm glad our chaps are not of that stripe."

"They certainly appear an ill-conditioned set of men," said Colonel Stannard, in a tone half-pitiful, half-contemptuous. "It is not easy to realize that they are our brothers. There seems such a wide gap between us, and one so hard to bridge over."

"I don't suppose we can ever become very chummy with such people, can we, father?" asked Kent, smiling.

"No; we can only treat them as well as possible, and trust thus to win their confidence and liking," replied the colonel. "But it will take a long time I fear."

By the time the end of this huge caravan had passed the Stannards were within sight of the town, and no longer had any doubt as to there being full ten thousand camels in the amazing procession.

"I never imagined I would see so many camels together in my life," said Kent, when the last ungainly brute, carrying his almost equally brutish driver, lumbered by; "and," he shrewdly added, "I certainly never want to see so many again."

It was almost nightfall when they reached the town, and, owing to the number of their animals, had some difficulty in securing accommodation, the inn-keepers seeming to have a particular objection to the camels, probably because of the room they take up and the aversion other animals have to them. But finally matters were arranged, and they settled down for the night.

In the morning the first thought was concerning the crossing of the Hoang-Ho, and on making inquiry of the innkeeper Colonel Stannard received the unwelcome intelligence that this was quite impracticable.

"Just a week ago," said the man, "the Yellow River overflowed its banks, and now the plains on both sides are completely inundated."

The colonel at first refused to credit this statement. He knew that the river was subject to periodical overflows, but these occurred ordinarily in the rainy season, whereas it was now the dry season, and a particularly dry one at that.

He accordingly proceeded forthwith to the riverside to see for himself.

One look, however, was sufficient to show him that the Tartar had not exaggerated. The Yellow River had become a vast lake, whose farther limits were scarcely visible. Here and there the higher ground rose above the water like islands, while the houses and hamlets seemed to be floating upon the waves.

"What on earth are we to do now?" asked Kent in dismay at this unexpected and disconcerting prospect. "How can we get all our caravan across there?"

"That's the problem we have to solve somehow," answered his father; "and it will evidently require very careful consideration."

The innkeeper, with a keen eye to the main chance, for he could see that they would prove very paying guests, insisted that the only thing they could do was to wait for the subsidence of the waters, which would certainly take place in the course of a month.

But to this Colonel Stannard would not listen. Nor would he consider the suggestion of turning northward and avoiding the river by making a long detour.

"We can cross here as well as anywhere," he said in his resolute way, "and we must do it with as little delay as possible."

When the wily innkeeper realized that there was no shaking the fixity of the colonel's purpose he changed his tune, and offered to procure a guide who would safely conduct the travellers to the real bank

of the river, where ferry-boats might be obtained for the actual crossing.

His offer was promptly accepted, and under the guidance of his man, a quite intelligent Tartar, they set out on their difficult and exhausting march across the inundated ground.

The animals were soon up to their knees in a thick, slimy mixture of mud and water overlaying somewhat firmer stuff, in which the poor creatures slid and slipped in a most laborious and painful way, threatening to fall at almost every step. The horses did not do so badly, but the camels presented a pitiable sight. With heads incessantly turning this way and that in vain search for firmer footing, their awkward bodies trembling like jelly, and the sweat exuding from every pore, they looked at the same moment both ludicrous and pathetic, and Kent's heart was touched with compassion for them.

"The poor brutes," he said sympathetically. "How utterly miserable they seem, to be sure."

His own clever little mare got along very well indeed. She seemed to know instinctively where to place her feet, and she rarely made a mis-step.

Splashing and floundering they toiled onward at a rate of about a mile an hour, until they reached a village that stood a few feet above the flood.

It was a wretched little place, inhabited by a few poverty-stricken people whose rags scarcely sufficed to cover their gaunt frames. Here they found a few boats, miserable affairs, rotten and leaky, yet it was

necessary to use them in order to reach the dyke which was still some distance ahead.

The boats could accommodate only the men of the caravan, all the animals having to wade or swim; but while the horses did this as naturally as if thoroughly used to it, the camels gave great trouble, resisting obstinately at first and only yielding to violent measures.

Stretching out their long, ugly necks they advanced most cautiously through the water that in some places was so deep as to leave only their heads and humps visible, and Kent's patience was tried to the utmost by their slowness of progression ere the big dyke was reached, and all were once more on a dry, firm footing.

This dyke, except in times of unusual flood like the present, served to keep the troublesome river within bounds, and at the place where they landed it made quite an island, upon which stood a small pagoda surrounded by a cluster of huts. From these presently issued a number of ragged, rough-looking fellows, who were the ferrymen, Tokoura said, with whom a bargain must now be made.

Negotiations accordingly were at once opened, and the ferrymen, deeming themselves masters of the situation, demanded a price for the service that was out of all reason.

Colonel Stannard was not to be thus imposed upon. He sternly refused to pay one sapek more than seemed fair, and in the end, after much argument, a just amount was agreed upon.

Then came the work of getting the caravan embarked, and it proved a most difficult and exasperating business, so much so, that at times Kent thought it could not be accomplished, and he wondered how they would manage if they were compelled to give up the crossing.

CHAPTER XIX

THE CROSSING OF THE YELLOW RIVER

THE great difficulty was the getting of the camels into the boats, which were clumsy affairs with high sides that the animals had to spring over at the risk of breaking their legs.

The horses were easily persuaded to do this, but when it came to the camels it was very different. They planted themselves firmly on the shore, and refused to budge, although their drivers beat them with cudgels, while the ferrymen pulled at the ropes fastened to their noses until it seemed as if they must tear their nostrils off them.

This cruel work went on without result until at last Colonel Stannard put a stop to it.

"You will only injure the creatures," he said, "and accomplish nothing. You must try some other way."

Then came Bunty to the front with a suggestion which he was authorized to try.

The largest camel stood close beside the boat, and the Goorkha, going back some yards, rushed forward and flung himself with all his force against the animal's rear. This sudden shock drove the camel

forward so that in order to prevent itself from falling into the water it had no alternative than to raise its fore feet into the boat. This effected, the rest was easy. A few pinches of the nose, and a few strokes of the cudgel, and the awkward brute was on board, to the extreme relief and satisfaction of all concerned.

The same expedient served with the others, and at last the whole caravan was afloat on the turbid waters of the great river.

But this did not mean that their troubles were over. The camels proved very unruly passengers. Possessed with nervousness they refused to keep still, rising from their knees as often as they were made to lie down, and threatening to overturn the boats by their untimely movements.

The boatmen were in a highly agitated state. They went from camel to camel, forcing them to their knees, and receiving for their pains disgusting volleys of the green, vile-smelling cud which these creatures eject when angry, and for which they retaliated by spitting back at their assailants.

Had the situation not been so critical, this struggle between the ferrymen and their four-footed freight would have been highly ludicrous, for as fast as one camel was made to lie down another rose up, so that Kent could not help laughing heartily, and even the colonel's grave features relaxed into a smile of amusement.

But it was far from being a joke, notwithstanding. The current of the river ran strongly. The boats were miracles of clumsiness, and had each only half

enough men for their proper management. Consequently when, heavily laden as they were, they once got out into mid-stream their crews seemed to lose control of them, and they began to drift downward instead of steering a straight course across.

At this the men of the caravan grew alarmed, and their excitement communicated itself to their animals, with the result that panic and confusion soon spread throughout the fleet. To make matters worse the wind rose, taking hold of the mis-shaped boats, and causing them to collide in a way that threatened their foundering.

Altogether the state of affairs was decidedly serious, and Colonel Stannard, who could only look after the boat into which he and Kent had gotten, fumed at his inability to do anything more.

He shouted out directions and commands to such of the others as were within hail, but they were without effect, since the flurried boatmen did not understand a word of them.

Kent regarded the situation with lively concern. For once he had absolutely nothing to suggest, yet rather than be a passive spectator of the emergency he seized a paddle, and applied himself energetically to helping his own boat shoreward.

Things were rapidly approaching a crisis, which seemingly must result in serious loss, when in the nick of time there came first a lull, and then a change in the wind.

Instead of blowing down stream it blew straight across, and as soon as the boatmen observed the

change they began to recover their wits. Without loss of time clumsy square sails were hoisted, and these, filling with the wind, not only brought the boats under control, but moved them in the right direction, so that presently they all managed to make the other side of the river, to the inexpressible relief of Colonel Stannard and his party.

There was some trouble in disembarking the different animals; but with patience this was at last accomplished, and the passage of the Yellow River was effected.

“Thank heaven, that’s over!” exclaimed Kent, in a tone of hearty satisfaction. “I never was so sick of anything in my life, and I want no more of the Yellow River.”

“You will have to have it all the same,” his father said laughingly, giving him a pat on the shoulder, “for we come to this river again on the other side of the Ordos Desert that now lies before us.”

“But can’t we take some other route that will avoid the confounded river?” Kent protested. “Surely there’s more than one way to L’hasa.”

“No doubt there is, Kent,” responded the colonel, “but Tokoura knows only one, and we must be guided by him, and he tells me we shall have to cross the Yellow River again on the other side of the desert.”

They were now on the edge of the great Ordos Desert, and had before them more arduous travelling than any they had hitherto experienced.

The place where they landed being a fertile spot,

they decided to remain for a few days in order to rest their animals, and strengthen them to endure the privations that were awaiting them. So Kent took advantage of the holiday to try his luck at duck shooting.

Tartary is a wonderful place for birds. All day long they were to be seen flying hither and thither in little flocks or big battalions, going through evolutions as if drilling for the great migration southward whose time was drawing near.

For the most part they were such as Kent already knew, wild geese, ducks, teal, storks, bustards, and so forth, but there were also some strange varieties, such as the *youen-yang* and the *loung-kio* (dragon's foot), that he had never seen elsewhere.

The *youen-yang* was a bird about the size of a duck, but having a round beak, a red head, a purple body, and a black tail, and instead of a quack it gave forth a plaintive, penetrating cry like the sigh of a person in deep suffering. These birds always went in pairs, and frequented marshy places, where they would be seen incessantly skimming over the water side by side. This remarkable devotion was the cause of their names, the cock being called *youen*, and the hen *yang*, hence the common designation of *youen-yang*.

A still stranger bird was the *loung-kio*, for it appeared to combine characteristics of the bird, the animal, and the reptile. It was about the size of a quail, had brilliant black eyes encircled by a shining band of azure, a speckled body, and legs that instead

of feathers were covered with a sort of rough hair like that of the musk-deer, while its feet were totally different from any other bird's, being exactly like those of the green lizard, and covered with intensely hard scales, whence the name of dragon's foot.

Accompanied by Bunty and Hercules, and supplied with sufficient ammunition and food for a good long day's shooting, Kent set forth right after breakfast.

"Be sure and bring back a big bag now, my boy," said the colonel, who would have gone with him had not a touch of rheumatism warned him that he had better stay behind. "My mouth is watering for roast duck, and try to get a dragon's foot if you can. I want to preserve the skin."

"All right, father, I'll do my best," Kent replied gayly, as he strode away with Bunty and Hercules in close attendance, and, following at a respectful distance, one of the caravan men bearing an extra gun and the provisions.

On the advice of Tokoura they turned eastward, and walked along the river bank for a mile or more where the birds seemed to be holding a sort of convention, in such great numbers were they gathered.

Kent's eyes gleamed with delight as he saw flock after flock of wild ducks and geese swimming about among the water weeds, or flying to and fro in noisy numbers.

"We'll have no trouble getting all we can carry back with us, will we, Bunty," he said exultingly, and the Goorkha, his dark face lit up with a gleeful grin, responded :

"Ay, for sure : very much plenty here."

Before the birds could be bagged, however, it was necessary to get within range of them, and the nature of the ground made this a matter of some difficulty.

"I wish we had a boat," Kent exclaimed after a survey of the situation. "This mud is simply horrible, and it gets worse the farther you go."

The marshy ground certainly afforded very poor footing, and much care had to be exercised in approaching the game. But presently they both got within easy range, and they blazed away at a big flock of ducks which had just settled down on the water.

A tremendous commotion followed the report of their guns, and amid a tumult of splashing and flapping and quacking the ducks took flight, leaving half-a-dozen of their number behind.

It was now the mastiff's turn to be useful.

"Get them, Herc, get them!" Kent commanded him, pointing to the dead birds.

The intelligent creature needed no second bidding. Plunging into the chill water he sprang out, and brought them back one after another until they had all been thus retrieved.

"Ah, Herc, what a comfort you are!" exclaimed Kent as he patted his dripping head. "How could I get on without you?"

Making their way back to the river bank, they went on until they came to another cove where the birds were plentiful, and a well-aimed volley added several more to their bag.



"... Why, what's the matter, Bunt?" ...

A little beyond this point Kent sighted a flock of wild geese out on the river, and nothing would do him but he must have a try for them, in spite of Bunty's objection that they could not get within range except by crossing a very dangerous-looking place.

"Don't you worry about that," Kent retorted in a tone of entire confidence. "Just follow my lead, and we'll get along all right."

His object was to reach a thick bunch of reeds that would afford good cover, and from which they could fire upon the wild geese with a good chance of securing some of them.

Making a wide detour so as to approach thus from the rear and keep it between themselves and the birds, they presently found that it would be necessary to wade some distance through the chilly water.

Bunty did not like the idea of this at all. In fact he had already had enough of the business, and was anxious to return to the camp. Only his profound respect for Kent kept him from protesting strongly; as it was he very plainly sulked, and hung back so that Kent exclaimed impatiently: "What's the matter with you, Bunty? You're not funkling at a little cold water, surely?"

The water grew deeper and the bottom softer the farther they went, until at last Kent began to think better of his project, and to wish himself back on dry land. But his pride urged him on until they were both up to their middle and Hercules was swimming, and by this time the bunch of reeds was so much

nearer than the shore that it seemed safer to make a dash for it than to retrace their way shoreward.

"Come along, Bunty," cried Kent cheerily, although the tone belied his real feeling. "Let us make a break for it."

Holding their guns above their heads they plunged desperately on, the water coming up to their shoulders, and their feet sinking deep in the clinging mud.

It was terribly hard work, and more than once Kent thought he was mired beyond his power to extricate himself, but managed by a frantic struggling to get free again. Poor Bunty wallowed and groaned and grunted without cessation, and no doubt blamed his young master bitterly for getting into such a pickle for the sake of some ordinary wild geese. Hercules alone had no difficulty. He swam high and strong, and seemed to be quite enjoying himself, being in blissful ignorance of the perilous situation of his two-footed companions.

CHAPTER XX

ON THE ORDOS STEPPE

THE water had risen to their necks, and seemed just about to engulf them, when to his unspeakable relief Kent touched a bit of firmer ground.

"Here we are, Bunty!" he cried joyfully. "We're all right now."

Bunty struggled toward him, and together they made a final rush which took them right up to the reeds where they were clear of the water altogether.

"Thank heaven!" Kent exclaimed, after he had landed. "I was afraid we wouldn't make it. Ugh! but it's cold. I'm shivering so that I'll not be able to hold my gun steady."

"We should not have come, for sure," said Bunty through chattering teeth. "How shall we get back again?"

"Oh, let us try and get some geese first," returned Kent, starting to make his way through the reeds.

Doing this as noiselessly as possible they reached

the outer edge of the clump only to find the birds flown.

"Well, I never!" cried Kent in a tone of profound disgust. "If that isn't the worst kind of a sell. Here we've had all this risk and trouble for nothing. I just feel like kicking myself."

At that moment a flock of birds that were not ordinary wild-fowl flew over his head, and throwing up his gun he took a snap-shot at them. He had no time to aim carefully, yet his shot told, for two of the birds tumbled into the water not far from where he stood.

"Fetch them, Herc, fetch them," he called to the mastiff, and the faithful creature, promptly springing back into the water, laid them both down at Kent's feet in a few minutes.

"What under the sun are they?" he exclaimed in surprise when he had examined the birds. "I wonder can they be the *loung-kio* that father mentioned? I hope they are, since he asked me to bring him back one of that kind if I could. Come along now, Bunty, we must be getting back, for we'll bag no geese here, that's clear."

Bunty evidently shrank from going into the water again, but dutifully followed Kent until they were again wading to their waists, when suddenly he gave a sharp cry of pain, and would have fallen over had not Kent fortunately been near enough to throw his right arm about him and hold him up.

"Why, what's the matter, Bunty? What's happened

to you?" he cried in alarm, his first thought being that something had bitten his companion.

But the Goorkha was in such agony that he could not speak, and, without waiting for his explanation, Kent hurried him back to the islet, which only after great exertion on his part was he able to regain.

Then he understood what was wrong with Bunty. He had been attacked by violent cramps due to the coldness of the water, and was utterly unfit to wade ashore.

Here was now an awkward state of affairs indeed. The afternoon was waning and the air growing rapidly chillier. They were both wet to the skin. They had no means of lighting a fire at which to warm themselves. To remain where they were all night would certainly entail serious consequences upon both, if it did not cost them their lives, and yet for Bunty to attempt to reach the shore in his present condition was manifestly impossible.

"What are we to do?" Kent groaned as he gazed anxiously landward. "There's not a soul in sight to help us. I believe I'll wade ashore alone, and hurry to the camp for some of the men."

No sooner had he given utterance to this plan than the resolution was formed to carry it out.

Bunty objected for a moment, mainly because he shrank from being left alone, but Kent insisted, and, bidding Bunty stay just where he was, he once more plunged into the water.

He did not carry his gun this time, and by way of

making the perilous passage easier and safer he took hold of his dog's collar, saying :

" Now then, Herc, we're going to do this coupled. Go ahead, old chap, I'll follow your lead."

Seeming to thoroughly understand what was required of him, the big mastiff ploughed through the water at a great pace, fairly towing Kent after him, and when they came to the deepest part his master felt devoutly thankful for his efficient aid.

" You splendid fellow ! " he murmured gratefully ; " but for you I'd never be able to manage it."

Even as it was he found the fording no easy matter, and was filled with apprehension when sundry sharp pains gave warning of his being in danger of the dreaded cramps likewise.

But happily, with Hercules' zealous co-operation, he got to *terra firma*, and giving the Goorkha a parting shout of " I'll be as quick as I can, Bunty," he started off at as fast a pace as his chilled and cramped limbs could manage.

He reached the camp in so exhausted a condition as to cause quite a sensation, and to create alarm for his missing companion.

As soon, however, as he recovered his breath and explained matters, all thoughts were turned upon the rescue of Bunty from his perilous plight.

Champ at once expressed his determination to go, and Tokoura seconded him promptly.

" In that case, Kent," said Colonel Stannard, looking well pleased at his subordinates' readiness, " there is no need for either of us to go. You, indeed, must

get off these wet things and cover yourself with blankets, or there's no knowing what may be the consequence."

Kent gave the men the needed directions, and, taking one of the pack horses with them in case Bunty should not be able to walk, they hurried to his aid.

It was after nightfall ere they returned, bringing not only Bunty, but all the birds which had been shot, and which the Goorkha took good care should not be left behind.

On seeing the two birds which Kent had shot from the islet the colonel was highly delighted.

"They are veritable dragon's foot," he said. "What a lucky fellow you are, my boy, to be sure. One might look for these for a month without seeing them, and here you stumble across a fine brace in the most unexpected manner. I must try and preserve their skins to take back to India with me."

He accordingly displayed his skill as a taxidermist by deftly skinning the *loung-kio* and treating the skins so that they would be preserved.

Two days later the caravan once more got into motion and began crossing the dreaded Ordos Desert.

The change from the region through which they had of late been passing could hardly have been more marked. Instead of the ponds and lakes and swamps which had been so numerous, it was an arid, barren country made up of rocky ravines and marly

hills, or of great plains covered with a fine moving sand that the restless winds carried hither and thither. In place of abundant herbage there were only a few thorny bushes and some stunted ferns, dust-covered and ill-smelling. At rare intervals were patches of thin, tough grass, so firmly rooted that the poor animals could get it out only by digging into the sand with their nozzles. Not a rivulet nor spring of water existed, but at wide intervals were situated ponds and cisterns holding scanty stores of fetid water.

Tokoura knew all about this, and on his advice before starting they filled with water everything in which the life-giving fluid could be carried.

"We shall have to forego the luxury of cleanliness till we reach the Yellow River again, Kent," said Colonel Stannard, smiling. "Water will be too precious to wash with so long as we are in the desert."

"Oh, dear, how dreadful," sighed Kent; "and it's just here, where the sand gets all over you, that you want a good washing every little while. But of course there's no help for it. We'll do well, I suppose, if we can get enough to drink, judging by the looks of things."

"That we will, my lad," responded his father. "But let us hope for the best. Tokoura knows the route, and will take good care of us, I have no doubt."

Although so destitute of water and herbage, the Ordos Steppes, strange to say, had a vigorous life

of their own. Active gray squirrels, agile yellow goats, and beautifully plumaged pheasants were often seen. Hares, too, abounded, and showed little fear of the travellers, rising on their hind legs and pricking up their ears as the caravan went by, but making no attempt to take to flight.

In fact they seemed so tame that Kent could not find it in his heart to shoot them, although he had no compunction about bagging a brace of pheasants every now and then, as they were excellent eating.

Occasionally they came upon small encampments of the Ordos Mongols, who seemed the most miserable of beings, living in wretched little tents scarcely fit for dog kennels. As soon as the caravan approached, it was assailed by a crowd of these squalid creatures, who prostrated themselves at the travellers' feet, giving them the most magnificent titles while they abjectly begged for charity.

Kent was filled with contempt and disgust at them, and would have liked to compel them to keep their distance.

"We can't afford to feed them all," he protested, "and the more we give the more they want."

But his father was more patient with the poor creatures and never refused them such portions of meal, millet, and mutton as he thought could be spared from their own stores.

The farther they advanced the more desert and dismal grew the country, and the depressing influence

of their surroundings showed itself in the silence which pervaded the whole caravan.

No one seemed to be inclined to talk. Even Kent's active tongue was stilled, and for hour after hour they all plodded on with grim resolution, Tokoura leading, Colonel Stannard at his side, Champ and Bunty riding together next, while Kent on his hardy little mare, with the mastiff at her heels, now rode beside his father and now dropped to the rear, according to the impulse of his restless spirit.

This dull, drear monotony taxed his patience sorely, and he longed for the end of the hateful desert.

One morning, when they were crawling at a slow pace over the soft, deep sand, the atmosphere grew strangely close and oppressive. The perspiration ran down the faces of the men, the horses became soaked with sweat, and the camels, stretching out their long necks, opened wide their mouths as if gasping for breath.

"Big storm soon come," said Tokoura, shaking his head solemnly. "Very bad for us," and he anxiously surveyed the horizon.

Presently dark, heavy clouds began to gather in the north, and sharp gusts of wind to break in upon the ominous stillness of the atmosphere. The foxes could be seen scampering into their holes, and the yellow goats fled past, evidently making for the distant mountains.

Just before noon came appalling claps of thunder

and blinding flashes of lightning which threatened to stampede the animals, and the efforts of the entire party were required to keep the panic-stricken creatures from breaking away. Yet this was only the beginning of troubles. While the thunder roared and the lightning flashed the hot suffocating air suddenly gave place to an icy wind from the north that chilled the travellers to the very marrow, and roused great clouds of sand that threatened to smother them.

To make headway against the biting, sand-laden blast was altogether out of the question, and so in obedience to Colonel Stannard's commands the whole caravan gathered close, the animals on the outside and the men in the centre holding fast to rope and rein by which camel and horse were kept in check.

Save such slight barrier as the bodies of their animals afforded there was no protection from the assaults of the elements, and now, as if to complete their misery, and perchance compass their destruction, the floodgates of heaven opened upon them.

The rain did not fall in drops, as the travellers had been accustomed to see it, but in great sheets of ice-cold water, instantly turning the sand into a sort of sticky mortar that neither man nor beast could walk in, and drenching to the skin the unfortunate wayfarers, who were exposed to its full fury.

Nor was this the worst. The rain having done its work thoroughly was followed by hail in great pellets that stung the animals until they were driven almost

crazy, and drove the men to shelter themselves as best they could beneath their outspread cloaks.

Last of all came snow, blotting out the view in all directions, and descending in such quantities as to threaten to bury the whole caravan in the course of a few hours.

CHAPTER XXI

THE CAVES IN THE MOUNTAIN

IN the midst of all these alarming circumstances Colonel Stannard maintained a firm composure that did much to comfort Kent and to sustain the spirits of his men. His keen gray eyes seemed to comprehend everything in their sweeping glance, and his clear, strong voice was heard in commands addressed to the shivering servants which they never failed to carry out with all the promptitude they could muster.

Yet, in spite of his apparent serenity, the situation of the party grew increasingly desperate. To make any movement was quite useless, since the snowstorm entirely obscured the landscape and they had no marks whereby to steer their course.

Nevertheless, to remain in their present position for any length of time would be simply to invite death from cold and exposure.

Already some of the camels showed signs of succumbing, although the hardier horses did not.

“ Unless this snow stops soon we shall be in danger of being buried in it, Kent,” said Colonel Stannard in

a half-jocular tone that served to hide his real concern. "I wonder if we could make snow-houses out of it that would protect us until the weather clears."

"Where are the shovels for that?" Kent responded with a doleful smile. "We could not do much with our own hands."

"You're right enough, my boy," responded his father. "Let us hope, however, we shall not have to resort to any such measure."

About the middle of the afternoon the snow began to fall less heavily, and the prospect to widen, whereupon Tokoura suggested that an effort be made to reach the range of mountains that were dimly discernible far to the westward.

Realizing that, however desperate the attempt might be, it was practically the only alternative left them, Colonel Stannard gave his consent, and with no little difficulty the sadly demoralized and discouraged party of men and animals was got in motion.

The condition of the ground was nothing short of dreadful. At each step the feet sank in a mixture of sand and slush almost knee-deep, rendering progress most laborious and slow.

The men were all too chilled to stay in their saddles, and walked along beside their animals, toiling painfully through the abominable mire.

Every few yards they were fain to halt for rest, so exhausting were their exertions, and it seemed hardly possible for them to reach their goal ere darkness enshrouded them.

While the mountain range was still some distance off Tokoura proposed that he be permitted to go on ahead and see what the prospects of finding some shelter might be.

Colonel Stannard had no objection to his so doing, and when he asked Kent if he would like to accompany him, the latter was only too glad to accept.

"We will follow on your track," said the colonel, "and I trust you will have some good news to bring back to us."

Tokoura's own horse and Kent's little mare had still a good deal of life left in them, and in spite of the encumbering mud set out at a tolerably good pace under the urging of their riders.

Plunging through the veritable Slough of Despond which surrounded them, the two horsemen directed their course for the dark mountain line.

"It will be better there," said Tokoura, with an air of entire conviction.

"I hope so, indeed," responded Kent. "It certainly can't be much worse."

That ride to the mountain was assuredly an experience never to be forgotten. With grim resolution the oddly-matched pair pushed forward, Tokoura breaking the way for Kent, their hardy steeds showing wonderful gameness as they ploughed sturdily onward.

As they neared the mountain the going improved, hard stony ground taking the place of the soft sand, and they were able to mend their pace.

Presently they reached the mouth of a ravine that cleft the mountain side, and Tokoura gave a grunt of satisfaction at finding traces of a path evidently leading into the depths of the defile.

They had followed this but a short distance when it suddenly opened out, and to their astonishment they beheld before them several large caves whose mouths were so regularly made as to manifest the hand of man.

"Hullo!" exclaimed Kent, his countenance brightening at the sight. "What have we here? Caves to be sure! I hope they're big enough to take us all in."

Hastening forward they proceeded to examine them, and to their delight they proved to be not simple caves formed by nature, but lofty, spacious rooms wrought out by human skill.

"Hurrah!" Kent shouted gleefully, as he realized that a perfect refuge for the whole party had been discovered. "This is just splendid! We must hurry back and let the others know."

"You stay here. I go back," said Tokoura, in his blunt, decisive way.

Not relishing the idea of another trip over the terrible desert, Kent readily acquiesced, and while Tokoura retraced the toilsome way to the waiting caravan he set out to explore the wonderful caves whose discovery was so timely.

The more he examined them the more surprised he was. The caves, although entirely deserted, had at one time been very comfortable human habitations.

They were well planned, had windows on each side of the door to admit light, were plastered throughout, and furnished with furnaces and the indispensable *kangs*, just like the ordinary dwellings of the better class. Not only so, but in one of them Kent found a large quantity of dried hemp stems, and another was full of millet stems and oat straw.

"Well, if this doesn't beat everything!" he soliloquized. "Plenty of fuel for the furnaces and of food for the animals, all ready to hand just when both are most wanted. Won't father be delighted when he sees what there is here! I must have a big fire ready for him."

It was an easy matter getting the furnace going, for the hemp stems made perfect fuel, and in a few minutes a most welcome and delicious warmth began to fill the cave.

"Ah, ha, that's something like!" chuckled Kent as he piled on the hemp, that crackled and blazed right merrily. "We shall have a cozy time of it when they all get here."

Night had fallen ere Colonel Stannard and the others arrived, and great was their delight at the warm reception Kent had in readiness for them.

"This is truly providential," said the colonel in a tone of deep gratitude. "To have stayed out on the desert would assuredly have cost some of us our lives, while in these comfortable quarters we can remain as long as we please and bid defiance to the weather." Then turning to the guide, he added:

"Tokoura, I never realized your worth more fully than at this moment. That was a fortunate day indeed on which I met you."

The guide's weather-beaten features lit up with a smile of gratification at his employer's warm words, and although he merely bowed in acknowledgment of them, it was evident enough that he was greatly pleased.

The caves afforded sufficient accommodation for the whole caravan, the Stannards with Tokoura, Champ, and Bunty taking possession of one, and the camel-drivers gathering in another after they had seen that their animals were duly stabled, the horses and camels in separate compartments.

The drenched and weary travellers found the warmth and brightness of the caves inexpressibly grateful. Their soaked clothing rapidly dried in the heat, their ravenous hunger was presently appeased with hot cakes fried in mutton fat, and steaming cups of tea, and as they compared the comfort of their situation with the misery they had been enduring, they regarded themselves as wonderfully fortunate.

The storm cleared away during the night, and a clear, bright day succeeded, which put everybody in good spirits.

As both men and beasts were feeling the effects of their experience in the desert, Colonel Stannard thought it well to remain in the refuge they had so happily reached for a couple of days, an arrangement that met with Kent's entire approval, as he was eager

to explore the curious region with its many tokens of a vanished population.

Accordingly, soon after the morning meal, he set out on a voyage of discovery, Bunty and Hercules accompanying him, as a matter of course.

"We'll follow up this ravine as far as it goes," he told his father, "and then climb the mountain side, if it is not too steep. There may be other caves like these that we have found, and perhaps some of the people still in them."

"Take good care of yourself, whatever you do, my boy," said the colonel, giving him a look of affectionate pride. "I would go myself if I felt fit, but yesterday seems to have quite knocked me up. Be sure you get back before sundown."

"You may depend upon my doing that," replied Kent with a laugh. "I have no desire to spend a night in the mountains."

The ravine ran far into the mountain range; but although they followed it to the end, they discovered no traces of human habitation.

But they did come upon a fine flock of wild goats that took instant flight at their appearance.

"We must bag a couple of these, Bunty," said Kent. "They're first-class eating. Let us see if we can't stalk them."

The goats were very wary, climbing the steep mountain side with the ease of flies, and keeping out of range in a way that was very provoking.

"Drat the yellow rascals!" Kent exclaimed angrily, as blown and wearied with his exertions he threw

himself down on a ledge to rest. "They're too knowing by half; but I'm going to get a shot at them all the same."

When he had regained his breath he tried again, and this time with better success, for by making a long detour he was able to get above the goats where they had halted in an angle formed by two jutting cliffs.

Leaving Bunty to keep the mastiff in check, he carefully crept along until he was well within range and had a clear shot. Then, selecting the plumpest-looking fellow, he fired, and to his delight brought down the animal with a bullet through its heart, while the rest of the flock scampered away panic-stricken.

Hitherto he had had eyes only for the goats; but now that his object was accomplished, he paused a moment to take in the view from his lofty position ere descending to where the goat lay.

Looking out over the wide waste of sand which they had traversed with so much labour, his attention was caught by a body of horsemen moving in the direction of the ravine. "Hullo," he exclaimed. "Who can those be? Perhaps it's a robber band. In that case, the quicker I give the alarm the better. I wonder has any one else sighted them. I'm afraid my goat will have to stay where he is for the present," and shouting to Bunty to follow him, he proceeded to scramble down the mountain side at a break-neck rate.

More than once he stumbled and slid on the treach-

erous rocks, but happily without harm ; and reaching the bottom of the ravine in good order, he set off for the caves at a rapid trot which left the short-legged Goorkha far in the rear, but not Hercules, who raced along beside him in evident enjoyment of the run.

He was completely winded when he got back to the others, and Colonel Stannard, surprised at his early return, and alarmed at his breathless condition, inquired anxiously :

“ What’s the matter, Kent ? What has happened ? ”

“ A lot of men coming,” Kent panted out. “ They’re on horses, and they look like robbers.”

At hearing this Colonel Stannard’s countenance grew suddenly grave.

“ From what direction, Kent ? ” he asked. And then turning to Tokoura, who stood by with a face full of inquiry, he said : “ Hurry to the mouth of the ravine and see what they are.”

Tokoura instantly obeyed, and in a few minutes was back again, the troubled expression he bore anticipating what he had to announce.

“ They are many,” he said ; “ and they come fast. Let us make ready for them.”

Not a moment was lost in carrying out the preparations. The camels and horses, which had been allowed to graze, were hastily driven back into the caves, where they had been all night, while the men, with all the weapons they possessed, were gathered in the big cave that the Stannards had occupied.

“ If it comes to the worst we can resist attack in

this cave," said Colonel Stannard; "but I trust it will not be necessary. The new-comers may prove to be quite harmless after all."

Having thus taken every precaution he could, the colonel said calmly :

"Now we are ready for them."

CHAPTER XXII

AT CLOSE QUARTERS WITH ROBBERS

THEY had not long to wait. Only a few minutes after they had put themselves in battle array, so to speak, the strangers appeared in the mouth of the defile.

Colonel Stannard supported by Kent, Tokoura, Champ, and Bunty, all armed to the teeth, stood in front of their cave, and immediately on perceiving them the horsemen came to a halt, looking very much surprised at the sight.

“ Speak to them, Tokoura,” said the colonel. “ Ask them who they are, and what they want ? ”

Stepping forward a little, Tokoura with a ceremonious bow put the question to the leader of the band in a language which the Stannards had never heard him use before. But the man thus addressed understood it at once, and promptly replied in a truculent tone, and with an expression of countenance not to be mistaken.

“ It is as I feared,” Tokoura said, turning to Colonel Stannard, and speaking in a low tone as if he did not want the others to hear. “ They are Dchiahours, and

their leader says that these caves belong to them, and that we have no business to be in them. He says we must get out immediately."

At the mention of the word Dchiahours Colonel Stannard knew that his worst anticipations were realized, and that he had to reckon with a band of remorseless robbers, who would not hesitate to destroy the whole party for the sake of what they possessed.

"We're in a very bad fix, Kent," he said, giving his son's arm an affectionate grasp, "and God only knows how we are to get out of it. But we must maintain a firm front, and not let these rascals imagine that we are afraid of them." Then turning to Tokoura, he said :

"Tell them that we did not know these caves were theirs, and that we will pay a just sum for having made use of them."

The robbers received this explanation with yells of derision. They thought they had their prey secure, and entertained no idea of accepting a small fee for the use of their stronghold when they proposed to strip their unbidden guests of everything they owned.

For the moment Colonel Stannard was in a quandary. The strength of the robber band was about equal to that of his own party, and they were evidently well armed. He knew very well that his camel-drivers could not be depended upon in such an emergency as the present. They were arrant cowards, who would suffer themselves to be slaughtered like sheep rather than fight.

The one advantage that he had on his side was the

battery of repeating rifles with which Kent, Champ, Bunty, Tokoura, and himself were armed. In comparison with the old-fashioned muskets of the Dchia-hours these rifles were as good as three to one, and in the hands of their owners would do deadly work.

Yet this was precisely what he was most anxious to avoid. To shed blood even in self-defence was the last thing he desired, and not until driven to it by sheer necessity would he have a shot fired.

"Tell them, Tokoura, we will pay twenty ounces of silver if they will permit us to pass out unmolested," he said to the guide.

Tokoura, still preserving his air of grave courtesy, gave the message, and the robbers laughed it to scorn. Twenty ounces of silver! What was that to them when they felt sure of the caravan's entire equipment?

Realizing the futility of further negotiations Colonel Stannard commanded his little party to withdraw to the interior of the cave, where the camel-drivers were cowering in abject terror, looking as if they had already given themselves up for lost.

Champ and Bunty remained to guard the entrance while the colonel consulted with Tokoura.

So long as they remained inside the cave they were of course secure from attack, but they could not stand a siege of any length, as their supply of food was by no means great. Moreover, the animals would starve, for they were not in the same cave as the fodder.

Whatever action was to be taken must be with as

little delay as possible. What then should be done?

Many schemes and devices to effect their escape without bloodshed if possible were earnestly discussed, Kent giving eager attention and offering an occasional suggestion. Yet nothing seemed just feasible, and a feeling of despair settled down upon them as they thus consulted to no purpose.

"We must leave the matter in the hands of Providence," said the colonel at last, rising from where he sat and going to the door of the cave.

"What are they doing now, Champ?" he asked of the stalwart Sikh, who stood on guard with rifle ready for instant action.

"They have dismounted, Sahib, and are picketing their horses," was the reply.

Sure enough, the Dchiahours, having ridden hard and long, and feeling perfectly confident of having the travellers in their power, had done as Champ said, and were now taking it easy while they waited for their hour to come.

The sight of this rash confidence caused Colonel Stannard to conceive a scheme for the deliverance of the party which he immediately proceeded to work out in his mind before putting it into execution.

While quite resolved to do battle with the robbers if that were inevitable rather than surrender to them at discretion, he desired above all things to avoid bloodshed, or at all events to have as little of it as possible.

He knew enough about them to understand that if

deprived of their horses they were at an immense disadvantage, and so he determined to make an attack upon the animals first in the hope that if successful it might obviate the necessity of a sanguinary struggle with their owners.

On communicating his scheme to Tokoura, the guide approved of it heartily.

"You kill their horses—then they no good," he said sententiously, and Kent enthusiastically pronounced the plan "immense."

The method of attack was quickly arranged. As already stated there were five good repeating rifles in the party, a formidable battery indeed in the hands of those who knew so well how to use them.

"Let each one choose a different horse, and take careful aim," said the colonel. "We must not waste a shot if possible."

Under his instructions they took up their position at the door and windows of the cave, and, having settled what horse each one would aim at, were ready to pull trigger the instant the command to fire came.

The simultaneous discharge of the five rifles made a tremendous report which sent the camel-drivers in the rear of the cave tumbling head over heels in frantic fright.

But the effect of the volley outside was far greater. So excellent was the aim that every bullet went to its mark, and five horses either fell dead where they stood, or dashed madly off, wild with the pain of a deadly wound, stampeding the other horses, and striking terror into the hearts of the Dchiahours,

upon whom the blow fell like a bolt from a clear sky.

Nor was the first round the only one. The moment the smoke cleared away the rifles cracked again, and their leaden messengers followed the panic-stricken horses thundering up the rocky defile, bringing two more to the ground and wounding others.

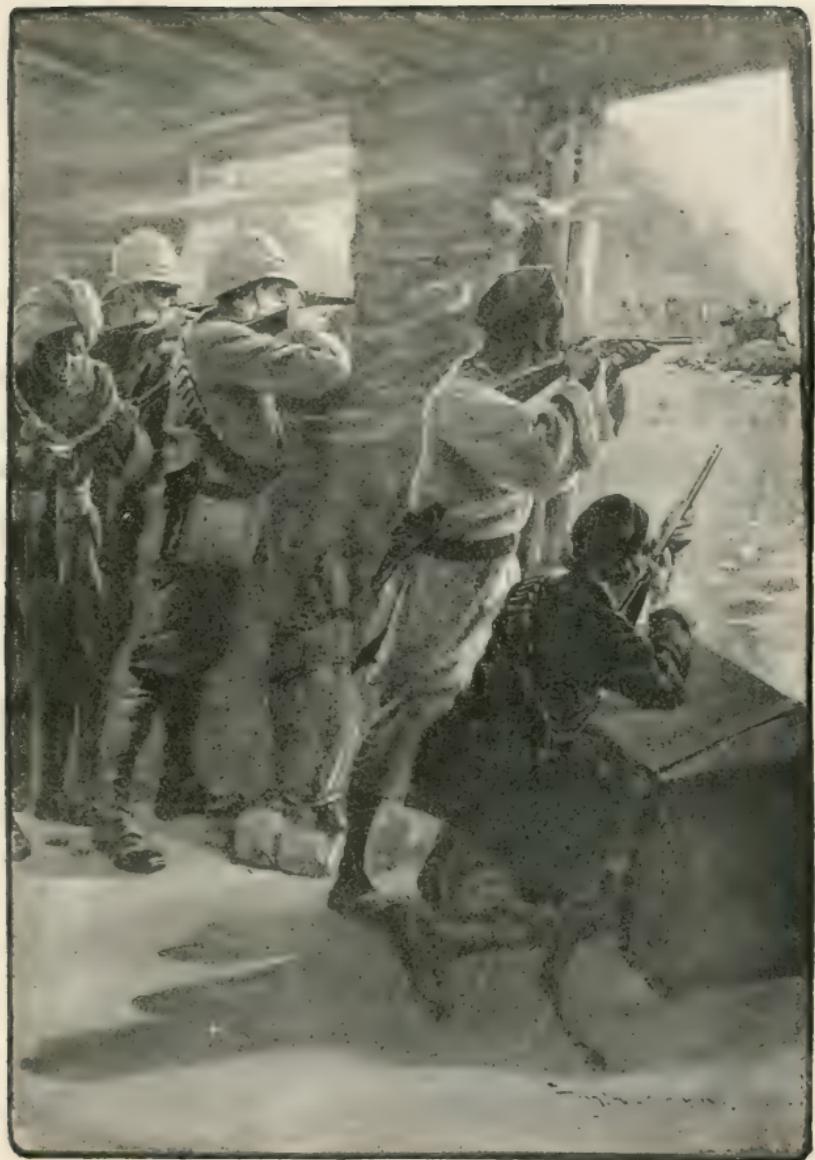
Stunned by this sudden assault, the nature of which was so utterly unexpected, the robbers were at first entirely passive, and had the repeating rifles then been turned upon them, fully one-half their number might have been slain ere they could have retaliated. But presently their panic changed to fury, and, seizing their weapons, they made a rush toward the cave, breathing out dire threats.

They evidently counted upon the Stannard party having emptied their guns, and being therefore unable to use them until they should be reloaded, which they supposed they could not do at once, and the delay would allow them to come to close quarters.

But in this they had reckoned without their host, for only two rounds had been fired from the rifles, and each still held four more charges in its chamber.

“Give them a volley, but aim just above their heads,” was the colonel’s command, when the robbers were within twenty yards of the cave.

The report rang out and the bullets zipped through the air within a few inches of the Dchiahours’ heads. The effect upon them was magical. Although none had been hit, each one felt that he had had a very narrow escape, and, fearing another volley, they all



"The moment the smoke cleared away the rifles cracked again."

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threw themselves flat on the ground, executing the manœuvre so simultaneously that Kent was moved to laughter, exclaiming :

“ See how they ducked ! They know how to take care of themselves.”

That they did know how was evident from their next proceeding, as instead of rising again to resume the charge, they made haste to crawl away in the other direction, taking advantage of the inequalities of the ground to protect themselves.

“ There they go,” cried Kent joyfully. “ They’ve had enough of it. Let us give them another round just to make sure.”

Colonel Stannard nodded assent to the suggestion, and once more the rifles spoke, the bullets flying close to the crawling men, who were by this time in a perfect funk, and had no other thought than to save their miserable lives. At this they became simply frantic with terror, and casting all prudence to the winds, they sprang to their feet and skedaddled up the ravine with their baggy garments fluttering in the wind, and causing them to have a most mirth-provoking appearance.

Relieved of all apprehension, the Stannards and their faithful followers were free to enjoy the ludicrousness of the sight, and they joined in a chorus of laughter that awoke the echoes of the rocky defile.

But Colonel Stannard was too wise to waste time in jubilation. The Dchiahours, although scattered like leaves before the wind for the present, might recover their wits and return to the attack with the

passion for revenge added to their lust for spoil, and it therefore behoved the caravan to get away as quickly as possible.

The packs were accordingly placed upon the camels with the utmost haste, and then, while Colonel Stannard, Kent, Bunty, and Champ guarded the rear, Tokoura headed the procession that filed out of the ravine and on to the open plain at a lively pace.

"We were in a pretty tight place, Kent, but we've got out of it even better than I expected," said the colonel, with a sigh of profound relief. "Those scoundrels were quite equal to any deviltry, and wouldn't have scrupled to kill us all and strip us bare, if they could only have managed it. But, thank God, they've been finely fooled, and that too without a drop of blood being shed, save that of the poor horses, and I must confess I feel quite sorry for them."

"But oh, how jolly mad the robbers must be," chuckled Kent. "Wouldn't they just like to get us in their power now!"

Pressing on at the maximum speed of which the clumsy camels were capable, the caravan ere sundown had left the mountain range so many miles behind that Colonel Stannard considered all danger of further trouble from the Dchiahours to be over, and, with an easy mind, gave orders to encamp for the night beside a convenient spring of pure water.

The wearied animals having been turned loose to find what pasturage they could, and an abundance of argols gathered for fuel, the members of the party were all glad to rest, being pretty well tired out by

the excitement and exertions of the past twenty-four hours.

When sleeping-time came, Colonel Stannard commanded two of the camel-drivers to act as sentinels lest there should be a night attack, and then the others settled down for their much-needed rest.

In silence and peace they slept soundly until midnight had long passed, when their slumbers were rudely disturbed by the violent barking of Hercules, whose mighty voice as he gave warning of unwelcome intruders might have awakened the seven sleepers.

In a trice Colonel Stannard was awake and alert. So too were Kent, Bunty, Champ, and Tokoura, and seizing their rifles they peered anxiously into the surrounding gloom.

CHAPTER XXIII

A MEETING WITH ROYALTY

THEY could just make out a number of dark figures crawling cautiously toward them, and at once suspected their true character.

"The Dchiahours again!" said the colonel in a low, stern tone. "Fire at them all together and *fire low this time.*" The five rifles seemed to make but one report, so well was the order executed, and the yells of pain and rage that immediately followed showed that some of the bullets had gone home. "Down all," commanded the colonel, illustrating his meaning by throwing himself flat on the ground.

The wisdom of the movement was made clear the next instant, when the robbers replied with their guns, and the bullets went whistling harmlessly overhead.

"Now then, give them another volley," was the next order, and again the five reports rang out as one, and again evoked a response which told of wounds inflicted.

"They'll not dare to come any closer," said Kent

exultantly, "will they, father? They must be getting sick of it already."

The robbers certainly seemed to have received a check that paralyzed them. It was impossible to make out just what loss they had suffered, but some certainly were wounded, if not killed, and the others stricken with terror.

"They run! They run!" exclaimed Tokoura, who could see farther in the dark than any other member of the party. Sure enough, the scoundrels, finding their dastardly purpose foiled, were taking themselves off into the darkness, whence they had come in the hope of surprising the camp and wreaking their vengeance.

"Let them go," said the colonel to Champ and Bunty, who seemed about to set off in pursuit. "We have taught them a lesson they will remember for a while. Let us see to it that none of our animals are missing."

The camel-drivers were at once sent out to gather the grazing beasts, while in some anxiety the result was awaited. Happily, after some searching they were all rounded up, and, much relieved in mind, the travellers sat about the fire until daybreak, for there was no more sleep to be had that night. Starting betimes on the following morning, the caravan journeyed steadily on across the steppe, the cold north wind which blew strongly making rapid motion much preferable to taking things easy, so that Colonel Stannard had no need to urge on his camel-drivers.

At the end of a week they reached the famous salt lake of Dabsoun-Nor, whence not only the Tartars round about, but several provinces of the Chinese Empire, obtain their supplies of salt.

They found it to be not so much a lake as a reservoir of mineral salt mixed with nitre, about seven miles in circumference, and having on its borders little clusters of tents occupied by the Mongols and Tartars who prepare the salt for sale. The business was simple enough. All the workers did was to gather up the stuff from the lake, pile it in heaps, and cover them with potter's earth.

Nature was then left to carry on the process of purification, and, when this was completed, the salt was packed in bags and conveyed to the nearest Chinese town to be exchanged for tea, tobacco, brandy, and other luxuries.

Colonel Stannard seized the opportunity to lay in a good supply of the indispensable commodity for the use of both his men and animals, the latter being very fond of it, especially the camels.

After leaving the Dabsoun-Nor they still had some twelve days of travel ere they reached the other side of the Ordos region, and, as in all that distance there was neither stream nor spring of water to be found, they would certainly have perished of thirst by the way but for Tokoura's wonderful knowledge of the right places in which to find the few wells that existed, and some of which were several days apart.

Even as it was both they and their animals suffered a great deal, the horses more than the camels, and

more than once it seemed as if they could not advance another mile without being watered.

Yet somehow the drivers managed to urge them forward, and in the end the crossing of the hateful desert was accomplished without the loss of a single beast, whereat Colonel Stannard was highly gratified.

A lofty mountain range marked the boundary of the Ordos Steppe, and the caravan was approaching this, when out of a pass between two of the peaks issued an immense and imposing procession, the sight of which caused Colonel Stannard to order a halt and draw the party aside so that the road might be left clear.

"Why, who can those folks be?" Kent exclaimed, as he gazed at them with eyes full of wonder and admiration. "They're evidently escorting some howling swell. I hope he'll be civil to us."

As he spoke four horsemen separated from the vanguard and galloped rapidly toward the Stannard party.

From the blue button which surmounted their caps it was evident they were all mandarins, and Colonel Stannard prepared to receive them with due respect.

"Illustrious sirs," said the oldest of the quartette, a really fine-looking representative of his race, "peace be with you. From what favoured country do you come, and whither do you now direct your honourable steps?"

Just how much to say in reply Colonel Stannard hardly knew, for he feared lest if he fully revealed his purpose objection might be made to it, and possibly

some obstacle placed in his way. He therefore said simply :

“ We are of the East, worthy sirs, and it is to the West we are going,” and then hastened to ask in his turn, “ And you, brothers of Mongolia, whither do you travel with so great a host and in such splendour?”

The compliment evidently pleased the mandarins, who bowed and smiled unctuously as their spokesman in suave tones made answer :

“ We come from the kingdom of Alechan, and our king is making the journey to Peking, that he may prostrate himself at the feet of him who dwells above the sky.”

After saying which he gravely saluted, and then, wheeling his horse, returned to his own party to report the result of the interview.

“ I trust we made a good impression on them,” said Colonel Stannard, as he watched them conferring with their own people, who had halted for the time. “ They can give us plenty of trouble if they choose and perhaps compel us to turn back, which, however, I devoutly hope they won’t do.”

After some minutes the mandarin galloped up again, and signified that his illustrious majesty, the king of Alechan, would be graciously pleased to hold converse with the strangers.

“ Phew!” whistled Kent, when he heard who the chief personage of the imposing procession was. “ And so it is a real live king we’ve met. May I go with you, father?”

“ Certainly, Kent, if you will bear yourself with

becoming gravity," replied the colonel. "I will take both Champ and Bunty for the sake of appearances, and Tokoura must come along to interpret for us."

They accordingly rode back with the mandarin, and were conducted to a richly-decorated palanquin borne between two superb mules.

In this odd conveyance sat the Tartar monarch cross-legged. He seemed to be about fifty years of age, and his full round features, twinkling eyes, and rotund form gave an impression of jovial good-nature that was very reassuring.

"King of Alechan, all peace and happiness be yours," said Tokoura, bowing to the ground and speaking on behalf of his employer.

"Men of the East, may you also be at peace," was the cordial response, and the formal greetings having thus been exchanged, the conversation proceeded quite briskly. The king evinced considerable curiosity as to the reason for the presence of Europeans so far in the interior, and, after parrying several of his questions, Colonel Stannard at last thought it well to be perfectly frank with him, and to explain the purpose of his journey.

On the matter being made clear to the king his jovial countenance grew grave, and he began at once to attempt to dissuade the colonel from his undertaking, pointing out the difficulties and dangers of the route, and assuring him that even though he should succeed in reaching the sacred city he would never be permitted to enter it, and would therefore have all his trouble for nothing.

Colonel Stannard listened to it all with courteous attention, but the words of his majesty, kindly meant as they undoubtedly were, had no effect whatever upon him. He had heard the whole thing before and had taken full account of it ere committing himself to the enterprise ; therefore, so long as the king was content with arguments, and did not use any stronger means to check him, he was quite satisfied. Finding that he was speaking to no purpose the good-natured king, instead of being incensed, said :

“ Well, since you are so determined to go on I shall say no more, but I will give you a document which may be of service to you if you meet any of my people.”

He accordingly directed his secretary to prepare this document, which was in the form of a long roll, and commended the adventurous travellers to the good offices of whomsoever they might meet on their journey, and had affixed the royal signature.

Colonel Stannard was very grateful for this quite unexpected kindness, and by way of return presented his majesty with a small telescope, the use of which he explained, and with which the Tartar potentate was highly pleased.

They then parted with many expressions of mutual good-will and the two caravans resumed their respective courses, the king's horsemen making a great show of their equestrian skill for the benefit of the foreigners, causing their horses to curvet, and prance, and plunge this way and that in a very dashing manner that amused Kent greatly.

Close behind the royal palanquin there followed a white camel of extraordinary size and beauty led by a young Tartar with a silken cord. This splendid creature bore no burden, but from each hump hung pieces of yellow taffeta, and it certainly seemed as if its step were more mincing and its look more supercilious than that of the common camels.

"My! but that's a fine fellow," exclaimed Kent. "What can they be going to do with him?"

"Make him present for the emperor," answered Tokoura. "Emperor he like white camels."

"Oh, ho! I understand," responded Kent. "Well, he ought to be well pleased with that one. I never saw anything like him in my life."

When the Alechan caravan had passed on the Stannards resumed their journey, and crossing the mountain range with some difficulty found themselves again beside the Yellow River, whose mighty volume here flowed from south to north.

The ferrying over of their animals gave them a good deal of trouble as before, but was at length successfully accomplished, and ere nightfall the river was left behind, and they were again in China, having for the time bidden adieu to Tartary and its barren wastes.

CHAPTER XXIV

BESET BY A SANDSTORM

THEY were now in the province of Kan-Soo, where the prosperity and comfort of the people were in striking contrast to the wretchedness of the region through which they had just passed. Here both agriculture and manufactures flourished, irrigation was extensively practised, corn was produced in immense quantities, and provisions were abundant, varied, and astonishingly cheap. The inhabitants too seemed hospitable and well-disposed, so that it was quite a pleasure to travel among them. Altogether the conditions had changed for the better wonderfully, and the travellers appreciated the difference immensely.

After a brief stay at Che-Tsen-Dye, a little frontier village in which they found good accommodation at the hotel of Justice and Mercy, they pushed on to Ping-Lou-Hien, a large walled town, where their entrance created considerably more of a sensation than they counted upon.

This place was renowned for the size and beauty

of its mules, to the breeding of which its inhabitants gave particular attention, and it chanced that the Stannards arrived on a day when a sale of these animals was being held.

All down the central part of the long, narrow street which bisected the town, handsome, well-fed, well-groomed mules were fastened by halters before the doors, and as Colonel Stannard and Kent rode slowly by they admired this display very much, Kent suggesting :

“ Let us buy a couple of them, father, if the price is not too high. Some of our horses are getting pretty well used up, and they say mules are hardier than horses anyway.”

“ Perhaps I will,” Colonel Stannard replied. “ We can see about it after we have secured our quarters at the inn.”

They were thus chattering at their ease, when suddenly a disturbance arose behind them that caused them both to halt and turn around.

The sight that met their eyes was certainly a strange one. They were some distance in advance of their camels, and the movement of the caravan along the street had been quiet enough until the camels came to where the mules were tied.

Then the trouble began. The hideous appearance and horrid odour of the ungainly ships of the desert struck terror into the mules. They reared and plunged and strained at their halters until they succeeded in breaking away, and at once stampeded down the narrow, crowded street, knocking over

people, upsetting merchants' stalls, and producing the wildest kind of disorder.

Instinctively the colonel and Kent drew up to meet and check this curious charge if possible; but when the mules bore down upon them, their horses, instead of remaining steady, wheeled about and joined in the stampede, in spite of the utmost efforts of their riders to control them. The camels in like manner had caught the contagion of fright, and so the whole caravan was running away, creating a fearful uproar, and evoking cries, curses, and threats from the owners of the mules and the other occupants of the street.

To a disinterested spectator the scene could not have failed to be exceedingly ludicrous, as horses, mules, camels, men, and goods were mixed together in apparently inextricable confusion.

But Colonel Stannard saw nothing funny about it. On the contrary, he felt much concerned, for he realized that this would arouse the enmity of the people of the place, and perhaps lead to awkward consequences.

Yet he was powerless to stay the tumult until at last the camels had all passed, and the owners of the mules were able to get their animals in hand again.

By this time the caravan had almost reached the end of the street, and, instead of remaining in the town as he had intended, the colonel thought it best to camp outside.

The wisdom of this step became clear presently, when, having got things settled, he and Kent went back to see about purchasing a couple of the mules,

and were met with such black looks and rude treatment that they could accomplish nothing.

"The sooner we get away from here the better, Kent," said his father. "We can do nothing with these people. They've evidently taken a strong dislike to us."

Kent was disappointed at their not being able to get the mules, and wanted Tokoura to see if he could not conciliate the dealers.

But Tokoura shook his head decidedly. "They won't sell us anything," he said. "Let us go away." And so they were fain to return to their camp empty-handed.

Leaving Ping - Lou - Hien behind, the caravan journeyed for many days through a well-populated country, crossing the great wall more than once, and skirting the banks of the Yellow River, making very satisfactory progress until they reached the Alechan Mountains, whose dreadful character had been depicted for them in the darkest colours by the king when he sought to dissuade Colonel Stannard from continuing his journey. They found them to be a long chain of hills wholly composed of moving sand so fine that when a handful was taken up it would flow through the fingers like water.

To cross this range proved a task of enormous toil and difficulty. At every step the horses and camels sank to their knees, and they could advance only by a series of exhausting leaps, while all the men must perforce wade through the yielding stuff themselves, it being out of the question to ride.

Not only so, but the element of danger was constantly present, for the treacherous hills seemed ready at any minute to slip away bodily from underneath them and change into avalanches which would engulf the whole caravan.

Poor Kent felt the labour of ploughing through the sand tell severely upon his strength and began to grumble a little.

"Mercy me!" he exclaimed, as he halted to rest his tired legs. "This is terrible work. I certainly can't stand much more of it. I'm pretty well played out already."

"Don't give up just yet, my boy," said his father cheeringly. "We'd better not call a halt here. There's a threat of wind in the sky, and if it catches us before we're clear of the sand it may go hard with us."

Kent glanced up at the sky, which was clouding over ominously, and grunting out something to the effect that it did not look very rosy, manfully resumed the laborious wading through the soft sand.

But there was a long stretch of it still to be traversed, and to make any faster progress was not possible, while the clouds gathered rapidly and the wind came in sharp puffs that were the undoubted precursors of a storm.

Tokoura's wrinkled countenance took on a deeply troubled look, the camel-drivers urged their ungainly charges to greater efforts, and the animals themselves showed signs of fear, trembling and panting nervously.

From time to time Colonel Stannard looked appre-

hensively at the heavens and then anxiously about him. He fully appreciated the extent of the danger that was drawing near, and sought to discover some haven of refuge.

But nothing of the kind could he discern. To right and left, in front and rear, the hateful yellow sand extended in ridges and hollows, and with an awful sinking of heart he realized that there was no escaping the peril now so close at hand.

"Keep close by me, Kent," he said, in a tone of ineffable tenderness. "I would to heaven we were well out of this."

As he spoke a strong gust of wind burst upon them, lifting the sand in a great cloud and whirling it away. Other gusts followed in quick succession until the air became full of flying particles, and to save themselves from suffocation the whole party followed the example set by the sagacious camels, who at once dropped on their knees and held their heads close to the ground.

"Your handkerchief, Kent," shouted the colonel. "Cover your face with it instantly."

Kent heard and obeyed, but even then the sand seemed to penetrate into his nostrils, and he felt as if he must surely smother.

Never in his life before had he been called upon to endure such agony. It was like being drowned in a dust-heap, and he thought he must surely die.

He could feel Hercules crouching close to him, evidently enduring the same misery, and seeking that aid which his young master was powerless to afford.

His father was on the other side with his head wrapped in a handkerchief, while scattered about in various postures were Tokoura, Champ, Bunty, and the other men, all striving to save themselves from suffocation.

Meanwhile the sand was piling up against them in drifts that would have buried them in short order had they not again and again shaken themselves free and changed their positions.

After blowing hard for almost an hour the wind suddenly dropped, the air became clear of sand, and it was possible once more to breathe freely.

“Thank God!” ejaculated Colonel Stannard, with the first full breath he was able to draw. “The wind has stopped for a while at all events. Come, let us make the most of our respite.”

With some difficulty the wearied animals were started again, and urged forward at the utmost speed of which they were capable.

It was now a race against the return of the wind, and with desperate energy the caravan fought its way through the clogging sand.

On they plodded, and still the wind held off. At last the river came in sight, the great Yellow River which got its name from this very sand that discoloured its waters, which were clear as crystal until it reached this region.

“Hurrah!” cried Kent joyfully, when he saw the gleam of water from the top of a ridge. “There’s the river. We’ll soon be all right.”

The colonel smiled significantly.

"I remember a young person expressing himself to the effect that he devoutly hoped he'd never see this self-same river again. Do you know who that was?"

Kent laughed as he replied: "I think I do, but I've changed my mind since then." The struggle was an arduous one, and ere the toiling travellers reached their goal the sandstorm again enwrapped them.

But, fortunately, this spell of it did not last so long as the first one, and when another lull came they made a frantic dash forward which brought them to the river bank, where all danger from the sand was over.

After resting for some time and getting rid of all the sand they could, they continued along the river-side until they found a good place to camp, and there settled down for the night, everybody feeling profoundly grateful at having escaped burial in the dreadful sand-hills of Alechan.

The weather now grew colder every day as the end of the year approached, and Colonel Stannard was glad that the route lay through a well-settled country, where inns of one kind and another abounded.

For another week the caravan journeyed thus from town to town, crossing rivers, ascending and descending rocky hills, twice passing the great wall, which twisted and twined over the country in the most bewildering way, and so coming to Tang-Keon-Eul, where Kent had an adventure that came near having serious results.

Although not very large, this town swarmed with a

strangely mixed population, composed of Tibetans, Eleuts, Kolos, Chinese, Tartars from the Blue Sea, Mussulmans from Turkestan, and the Long-Haired Folk, as they were called, from the wild north-land.

They were a turbulent and pugnacious people, who went about armed to the teeth, and seemed ready to engage in a brawl on the slightest provocation.

Colonel Stannard would have preferred pushing on at once, but it was necessary to replace several of the camels that had given out, and he had to remain over a day for that purpose.

While he and Tokoura were attending to this matter, Kent, with Bunty as his companion, Champ remaining in charge at the inn where they had put up, set out for a stroll through the crowded streets, Hercules sedately following. Business seemed to be very brisk, and the two visitors found much to interest them in the animated bargaining which went on, particularly when, as often happened, the buyer and seller got so worked up over the transaction as to fall to belabouring one another with their fists instead of their tongues.

While absorbed in watching an affair of this kind between a Tartar and a Chinaman, Kent did not miss Hercules, who had gone off to do a little exploring on his own account, with a butcher's stall as his goal, until a tremendous racket some fifty yards distant attracted his attention, because the chief element of noise was a thunderous barking that seemed very familiar.

“That sounds like Hercules,” he exclaimed, and,

looking around to find no sign of the mastiff, he added : " It must be the rascal. I wonder what he's up to. Come, Bunty, let us see."

They accordingly hastened in the direction of the disturbance, and found the big dog standing at bay before a butcher's stall with a leg of mutton between his paws, and a semi-circle of excited men threatening him with various weapons.

Thinking of nothing but the safety of his huge pet, Kent thrust himself through the crowd, saying : " Let the dog alone. I'll pay for the meat," while Bunty followed close at his heels, and the next instant they formed the centre of an angry mob whose sinister countenances were ominous of danger.

CHAPTER XXV

GETTING OUT OF A TIGHT PLACE

JUST as Kent reached the mastiff's side he saw the butcher raise a murderous-looking cleaver with the evident intention of letting it descend upon the dog, and darting forward like a flash he threw himself against the man with such force as to send him sprawling over his block, the cleaver falling harmlessly from his grasp.

Choking with rage, the fellow, who was a large, stalwart man, rose to his feet and made a furious rush at Kent, which, however, met with no better success than his attempt upon Hercules, for the agile, clever Goorkha extended his foot at the same moment that he shot out his fist, and down the butcher went again, this time with such violence as to knock the breath out of him.

All this took place too quickly for any one else to interfere ; but now Kent, glancing around, saw that the crowd was closing in upon them with malignant purpose, and, grasping Bunty's arm, he cried :

“ Inside the stall, quick. It's our only chance. Come here, Hercules.”

He then sprang into the empty stall, followed by the Goorkha and the mastiff.

"Now out with your revolver," were the next words, and suiting his action to them, he levelled his revolver at the surging mob.

Bunty instantly did likewise, while Hercules barked furiously, and those in the foremost of the motley throng realizing that death faced them from those shining barrels, sank suddenly backward. They had no idea of forfeiting their precious lives for the sake of teaching a couple of foreign devils a lesson in good behaviour.

Their alarm communicated itself to those behind, who followed their example, with the result that in less time than it takes to tell it, the door of the stall was completely clear and a considerable space vacant outside it.

With such promptness and unanimity was this retreat executed that Kent, ever quick to see the comical side of anything, could not forbear laughing at it.

"They've a holy terror of revolvers, haven't they, Bunty?" he said. "How lucky that we had them with us. Let us fire a shot over their heads just to scare them a little more."

Aiming well over the heads of their antagonists they pulled triggers together, and at the crack of their revolvers nearly the whole crowd ducked, some even falling to their knees.

"We're safe enough, Bunty," Kent continued in an assured tone. "They'll never dare come to close quarters."

Which was quite true, and yet the danger was by no means over, for even though they were safe from attack so long as they remained in the stall, they could be set upon the moment they left their refuge; nevertheless, they must needs effect their escape as soon as they could.

They were busy discussing the situation without getting much light upon it, when the clamour of men shouting and fighting some distance down the street caught the attention of the crowd outside the stall.

It was one of those brawls for whose frequent occurrence the town bore so evil a repute, and as every man went about with a sword by his side, a bloody conflict could always be engaged in at short notice.

The besiegers of the stall, eager for more excitement, promptly hurried off to the scene of the strife, and Kent was quick to take advantage of the diversion.

“Now then, Bunty, let us make a bolt for it,” he said, and holding up their revolvers, they darted out into the street, putting to flight a couple of men that still hung around.

Fortunately their road was clear, and they sprinted away at a pace that soon brought them safely to the inn of the Five Felicities, where the caravan had received accommodation.

Colonel Stannard was highly amused at Kent's graphic description of what had taken place.

“You certainly have the knack of getting into curious scrapes, my boy,” he said with an indulgent smile.

"And of getting out of them again, sir," Kent interjected, chuckling.

"So far, yes," responded his father. "Providence has been very kind to you. I trust your good fortune will not fail until we reach the end of our journey at all events. And now I suppose that this butcher that Hercules tried to rob and that you treated so scurvily, will be putting in an appearance with a claim for damages."

Sure enough, in the course of an hour the fellow came along supported by a mandarin, and demanded a preposterous sum as compensation for what he had suffered.

Colonel Stannard was courteous but firm. A reasonable amount he would not object to pay, but he would not be imposed upon even by a mandarin.

A prolonged controversy ensued, at which Kent grew exceedingly impatient, and which ended in the colonel paying a fair price for the mutton and as much more for the butcher's bruises, with which the rascal had perforce to be content.

The Stannards' host at Tang-Keon-Eul was a very intelligent Mussulman, and the colonel made many inquiries of him concerning the remainder of the route to L'hasa. The reports that he gave of it were certainly far from reassuring. According to him they would have to travel for months through regions utterly uninhabited, and where the cold during the winter season, now close at hand, was so terrible that travellers were often frozen to death. Moreover, there were numerous bands of robbers, called Kolos,

who roamed over the desert in quest of victims, and who did not hesitate to strip naked those who fell into their clutches, leaving them to die of hunger and exposure. Colonel Stannard listened to all this with grave attention. It did not affect his resolution to proceed in the slightest degree, but he was too courteous to pooh-pooh the innkeeper's doleful tales. At the same time the good man's well-meant warnings were not altogether despised, and when he heard of a party of Tartar-Khalkas having come to the town who were said to be going on to the sacred city, he lost no time in obtaining an interview with them.

They were sojourning at the House of Repose, and although only ten in number, they filled the whole spacious courtyard with their camels, horses, tents, and other baggage.

Their appearance when Colonel Stannard, accompanied by Kent and Tokoura, visited them, certainly went far to confirm the Mussulman's terrifying account of the danger from robbers, for they were armed to the teeth with muskets, lances, bows and arrows, swords and daggers, and seemed very proud of their arsenal of deadly weapons.

Greetings having been exchanged and hot tea with melted butter passed around, the colonel proceeded to question the Khalkas with regard to their plans.

He was much pleased to find that his information was correct. The party had come from near the Russian frontier, and was on its way to L'hasa to offer adoration to the Talé-lama.

"Would it be pleasing to your notabilities to have

our party join with yours?" Colonel Stannard asked. "We too desire to proceed to L'hasa, and having been told much concerning the Kolos, who are said to lie in wait for travellers on the desert, we think it might be better if the two caravans became one, at least until all danger of attack from robbers is past."

The proposal was at once cordially received. The Tartars fully appreciated the advantage of being strengthened by so well-armed an addition to their party, especially when these were foreigners, who were supposed not to be afraid of anything.

An understanding was therefore arrived at with little delay, and on the following morning the combined caravan set forth from the town, making quite an imposing appearance, with all its camels and horses.

The Tartars were all of princely blood, and with a couple of exceptions such fine-looking men that Kent greatly regretted he could not understand their language so that he might converse with them.

As it was he secured Tokoura's assistance at every opportunity, and with him to interpret managed to hold interesting conversations with the different members of the party as they jogged along the dreary route.

They left the Tang-Keon-Eul rapidly behind, for their animals were in capital condition, and at the end of two days' travelling reached the famous lamasery of Kounboum, where nearly four thousand lamas were in residence.

"Our Tartar friends tell me that the great feast of

flowers is about to take place, and that we should not miss seeing it," said Colonel Stannard to Kent. "I think therefore that we shall stay at Kounboum for this celebration."

"Oh, I am so glad!" exclaimed Kent. "Tokoura has told me a lot about this feast and the wonderful things they show there."

The lamasery occupied a most picturesque and beautiful site in a deep ravine that cleft the mountain side, and was adorned with fine trees, in which flocks of rooks, crows, and magpies kept up an incessant cawing and chattering.

On either side of the ravine, in amphitheatrical arrangement, stood the snow-white dwellings of the lamas, varying in size and dignity, but all alike surrounded by a wall and surmounted by a terrace.

From amid these houses, which were amazingly neat and clean, rose numerous Buddhist temples, whose gilt roofs and brilliantly coloured colonnades delighted the eye at every turn.

The residences of the higher officials of the lamasery were distinguished by long silken streamers fluttering from curious little six-sided turrets, and upon every building were mystic sentences in large Tibetan characters inscribed upon the doors and walls, or upon pieces of linen floating like flags from the roof.

Through the perfectly kept streets with grave faces and silent lips walked the lamas in their red dresses and yellow mitres, seeming to be too deeply absorbed in meditation to take any notice of the visitors.

"Are they not allowed to speak?" Kent asked of Tokoura. "They never seem to open their mouths."

"They are not obliged to be silent," Tokoura replied; "but they are such holy men that they do not want to talk. They spend their breath in saying prayers."

"They must have a pretty dull time of it then," Kent responded. "I don't think I'd care to be a lama, however beautiful the place where they live may be."

"I'm afraid that as a lama you would hardly be a success, my boy," said the colonel, regarding him with a smile of amusement; "for they prefer praying to talking, while you—well, you can finish the sentence for yourself."

Kent laughed and shrugged his shoulders. "This being a lama is a poor business at best. What good do these thousands do, I'd just like to know? They're no benefit to the world that I can see."

"You're right enough, Kent," was the answer. "They are nothing better than cumberers of the ground from our point of view. Yet it must be confessed, there is something very picturesque about them and their habitation, provided you do not seek too close an acquaintance, for distance certainly lends enchantment to both."

The date of the feast of flowers was the fifteenth of January, and as the day approached visitors in great numbers came from all directions. Kounboum was no longer the calm, silent lamasery where everything

bespoke the gravity of religious life, but a city alive with worldly bustle and excitement.

The harsh cries of camels, the braying of mules, and the bellowing of yaks filled the air, and on the slopes of the mountain overlooking the lamasery appeared clusters of tents sheltering those who could not find accommodation in the houses.

The day before the feast was devoted to a pilgrimage around the lamasery, and as Kent watched the great crowds of devotees prostrating themselves at every step and murmuring their monotonous prayer, his heart was filled with pity for their ignorance and contempt for their self-abasement. It was not until the night of the fifteenth that the great feature of the feast, to wit, the marvellous bas-relief in butter, was on exhibition, and the members of the Stannard party awaited that time with keen expectation, for they had heard amazing accounts of the wonders worked by the lamas in a material so common as ordinary butter.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE FEAST OF FLOWERS

THE night was clear and cold as Colonel Stannard, Kent, and the others, under the guidance of an amiable, intelligent lama, sallied forth to the feast of flowers.

The streets were brilliantly illuminated, adorned with effective decorations and thronged with the most picturesque and strangely assorted assemblage of people, all in high good humour and eager to miss nothing that was to be seen.

There were swarthy Tartar-Mongols ; uncouth, haughty Long-Hairs ; sleek, complacent Si-Fan from the Amdo country ; cunning Chinese, grave Mussulmen, wild-looking Tibetans, and at every turn the lamas in their red and yellow garbs, enjoying the occasion as heartily as any of the visitors.

The butter bas-reliefs were exhibited in the open air before the temples, and displayed by illuminations of dazzling brilliancy which gave full effect to their beauties. At first Kent refused to believe that they were really made of butter.

“ Why, father ! ” he exclaimed, “ they must be

trying to fool us. Such work as that could never be done in common butter. It's simply absurd."

His incredulity was certainly well justified.

Not only did it seem impossible that such marvels could be wrought in so poor and unreliable a substance as butter, but the artistic merit of the designs appeared utterly inconsistent with the uncivilized condition of those who had prepared them.

The bas-reliefs were of colossal proportions and represented subjects taken from the history of Buddhism. The faces of the personages portrayed were full of life and expression, their attitudes natural, and their draperies easy and graceful. One could distinguish at a glance the nature of the materials imitated.

Kent was particularly struck by the perfection with which furs were simulated.

"It's all just too wonderful for anything," he said, putting out his hand to touch one of the sculptures. "You can tell whether they mean tiger, fox, wolf, or sheepskin without the slightest difficulty."

Before his fingers reached the bas-relief Tokoura had caught his arm and drawn it back.

"Not touch—not touch," he said in a warning tone. "That make trouble."

Kent flushed and dropped his hand.

"Of course," he said apologetically, "they must not be touched, or they would soon be spoiled."

Surrounding the pictures were frames, also of butter, representing animals and flowers, and all perfect in outline and colouring, while along the way between

the temples were arranged smaller bas-reliefs illustrating battle and hunting scenes, pastoral episodes, and views of the celebrated lamaseries in Tibet and Tartary.

Finally the visitors reached the front of the principal temple, where there was a theatre, whose actors and scenery were moulded out of butter, the former being moved on and off the stage by some simple mechanism.

The Stannards were watching this unique performance with lively interest, when a tremendous flourish of trumpets drowned all other noises, and the colonel inquired of their guide what it meant.

He replied that the grand lama was about to issue from the sanctuary to inspect the bas-reliefs.

"What a great piece of good luck!" exclaimed the colonel. "We shall see a living Buddha. Come, Kent, let us get a good position."

They had just done so when the grand lama appeared in the centre of a brilliant group of the chief dignitaries of the lamasery, and preceded by a number of minor lamas, who cleared the way for him with great black whips which they used freely.

"Why, what an ordinary-looking man he is," said Kent in a low tone to his father. "I am awfully disappointed. I expected to see something quite remarkable. What do they worship him for, I wonder?"

The incarnation of Buddha was certainly quite a commonplace individual, as far as looks went. He seemed about forty years of age, was of middle stature,

and had a flat, heavy countenance and a very dark complexion.

But if he himself was the reverse of striking in appearance, his costume so closely resembled that of a Roman Catholic bishop as to call forth Colonel Stannard's surprised exclamation :

“ How strange, Kent. Do you notice his dress ? That yellow mitre on his head, the long staff with the cross in his hand, and the purple silk cape on his shoulders—he would pass for a bishop anywhere, wouldn’t he ? ”

After the grand lama had completed his tour of inspection the vast crowds of spectators gave themselves up to all kinds of merriment and horse-play, of which the Stannards soon wearied, and so they went back to their inn.

In the morning they were astonished to find that not a trace remained of the feast of flowers. All the wonderful bas-reliefs upon which so much time, trouble, and talent had been expended were demolished, the butter being thrown into a deep gorge for the crows to feed upon for many days to come.

Leaving Kounboum the day after the termination of the feast, the joint caravan proceeded on its way through the country of a nomadic people having large herds of sheep, goats, and yaks.

Of them Colonel Stannard made inquiry as to the possible proximity of the robber bands concerning whose ravages they had heard such alarming accounts, and was well pleased to learn that nothing had been

seen or heard of them for many moons, it being generally supposed that they had gone off northward.

"We must keep constantly on guard until we reach the Ko-Ko-Nor, nevertheless," he said, "for the very fact of their not having visited the region for some time may be the reason for their appearing now, especially if they should happen to have gotten wind of our caravan."

"But surely they would not venture to attack us, now that we are so strong," said Kent.

"Not openly, I imagine," replied his father. "They would prefer to ambush us if they got the chance, which, however, I devoutly trust they will not do. I have no ambition whatever to try conclusions with them. I would much prefer going on my way without a fight."

The route of the caravan lay through a mountainous country in which it was not possible to make rapid progress. Moreover, the narrow passes which from time to time had to be penetrated, rendered necessary the stringing out of the party in a way that would be very disadvantageous in event of attack, and Colonel Stannard always breathed more freely when they emerged from one of these gloomy gorges without interference from the dreaded Kolos.

They had gone on thus for several days undisturbed, and naturally enough were beginning to relax their constant vigilance, when the peril of which they had been warned fell upon them.

All day they had been toiling slowly through a deep ravine which twisted and turned in a most

irritating and bewildering fashion. The animals were tired out, the men cross and dispirited, and there seemed every probability of their having to spend the night in this miserable place.

Colonel Stannard did his best to urge the caravan forward, but could accomplish little, and at last he gave up in despair, saying : "There's no hurrying so unwieldy a body. Heaven grant the Kolos may not come on us now ! They would take us at a tremendous disadvantage."

The words had hardly left his mouth when there came from the rear a sudden outburst of wild, fierce yells, followed by a succession of frantic cries for aid.

"There they are !" exclaimed the colonel, bringing forward his rifle. "They are attacking our pack train. Come, we must stand them off if we can."

Kent, Tokoura, Champ, and Bunty at once joined him in hastening back to the spot whence the uproar came, the Khalkas following at a slower pace, for they evidently were not very eager to have a brush with the brigands.

Rounding a bend of the ravine they saw at a glance what was the trouble.

The Kolos, in what force could not be guessed, had shown themselves on the mountain side, and endeavoured to strike panic into the caravan by menacing shouts.

In this object they had entirely succeeded, for the camel-drivers were so smitten with abject terror as to lose all control of themselves or their animals, and these were now huddled together in awful confusion.

No blows had yet been struck, since no resistance had been offered, and it looked as if the robbers were going to have an easy time of it.

But the appearance of the well-armed party, led by Colonel Stannard, changed the aspect of affairs.

The Kolos saw that they were not to have matters all their own way, and promptly sought cover behind the rocks.

"Just see how they've disappeared!" exclaimed Kent contemptuously. "They're nothing but a pack of cowards."

"Don't hurrah until you are out of the woods, my boy," said his father, scanning the steep slopes with his searching glance. "We're by no means done with these rascals yet. They have the advantage of us in every way, and they know it. If we were only clear of this wretched place I would feel much easier in my mind."

The whole party was now crowded together in a very contracted space, and the Khalkas, who no doubt would have been brave enough out on the open plains to which they were accustomed, showed manifest concern at being thus hemmed in.

Indeed, but for Colonel Stannard restraining them, they would have dashed off, leaving their animals and baggage to fall into the hands of the robbers.

Obedient to his stern commands they kept their place, and got their guns ready to join in a volley as soon as the Kolos again showed themselves.

This, however, the shrewd scoundrels seemed in no hurry to do, and, after waiting a few minutes with

rifles ready, Colonel Stannard gave orders to proceed again.

By this time the drivers had recovered in a measure from their first panic, and they got their beasts going at a good rate, which carried them past the narrowest part of the ravine into a more open place, where there was sufficient room for the whole caravan to gather into a compact body.

Greatly relieved at the execution of this manœuvre, though he could not understand their being permitted to accomplish it unopposed, Colonel Stannard now announced that they would not attempt to proceed any farther that night.

"We must fasten our animals so that they cannot break loose, and then stand guard over them till morning," he said, and none who heard him had any thought of disobeying these wise directions.

Meanwhile nothing was seen or heard of the robbers, but this did not deceive the veteran soldier, nor Tokoura.

"The Kolos not go far away," he said, with a significant glance at the encircling mountain range. "They not in hurry. They come to-night, maybe."

"Well, we must all be ready for them if they do," responded the colonel, and Kent, patting his repeater, added :

"They don't know what damage these rifles can do. They'll perhaps be wiser after they've had a lesson."

Cold as the night was no fires could be lit, of course, and Kent sorely missed his bowl of hot tea, and the

savoury, warm stew Tokoura knew so well how to prepare.

But he consoled himself with the thought that he was learning how to endure hardness like a good soldier, and when the darkness came he took his place in the circle of sentinels with Hercules close beside him.

No sound broke the silence of the night save the occasional whispering of the men, or the moving of some of the animals, which resented being so closely herded. If the Kolos were still within striking distance, they were keeping wonderfully quiet, and giving no indication of what their plan of attack might be.

And so the anxious hours dragged by until at last Kent, who had squatted down beside Hercules, overcome with weariness fell fast asleep with his head pillow'd on the broad back of the faithful mastiff.

CHAPTER XXVII

A SUCCESSFUL STRATAGEM

WHEN the day broke without attack from the robber band, Colonel Stannard could not understand it. With every advantage on their side it seemed incomprehensible that they should remain passive.

“They’re laying some trap for us, I feel quite confident,” he said, as he swept the mountain side with his keen eyes, “and I would give much to know what it is.”

“Maybe they wait for us there,” suggested Tokoura, pointing to where the defile contracted again, forming a kind of gateway through which it would be necessary for the caravan to pass.

“I shouldn’t wonder if that is so,” responded the colonel, contracting his brows. “We must find out before we move from here. Bunty, could you not reconnoitre for us? You thoroughly understand hill-climbing, and how to keep from being seen.” The Goorkha smiled all over his broad countenance as he answered :

“To be sure ; I go all at once,” and he prepared to set off.

"Let me go with you, Bunty," cried Kent eagerly.

"No, no, my boy," said his father, laying his hand restrainingly upon his shoulder. "That would never do at all. This is work that only Bunty can do, and we must be patient until he reports what he has seen."

Kent grumbled a little but subsided, and Bunty departed on his perilous mission, armed only with his great knife and a revolver.

The others followed him with anxious eyes until he disappeared in a cleft of the rocks, and then set themselves to await his return.

He was gone nearly an hour, and the suspense had become so hard to bear that Kent would almost have welcomed the appearance of the Kolos in battle array by way of diversion, when at last the Goorkha appeared, out of breath, covered with dust and almost exhausted.

"Well, Bunty, did you mark them?" asked Colonel Stannard eagerly. "Where are they and what are they doing?"

"Yes, I saw them," panted the sturdy little fellow, his countenance full of pride at his exploit. "They are guarding the pass over there, and they mean to roll rocks on us when we come."

A thrill of horror went through Kent on hearing this. Such a method of attack stirred his indignation to the depths.

"The brutes," he exclaimed. "Is that what they're expecting to do? What can we do to them?"

"That's just what we must now consider," said the

colonel ; and, after getting from Bunty a full report of his observations, he gave himself up to earnest thought.

The situation certainly was one to call forth his utmost skill in strategy.

From Bunty's account the robbers outnumbered the fighting members of the caravan by two to one, and they were well armed with muskets, bows and arrows, and spears.

They had every advantage in the way of position, and were, no doubt, too shrewd not to realize it and to make it count to their profit.

Altogether the problem was a very difficult one, and the veteran soldier was still pondering over it when Tokoura ventured a suggestion, which, daring though it was, Colonel Stannard, after weighing the pros and cons, decided to act upon.

The scheme was for Tokoura, taking Bunty and one-half of the Khalkas, to climb the mountain side and approach the robbers from the rear, while Colonel Stannard, with the rest of the Khalkas and as many of the camel-drivers as could be spared, should make a demonstration in front, thus catching the Kolos between two fires.

"It's a desperate venture," said the colonel gravely ; "but I see no better way. Heaven grant it may succeed."

The Khalkas needed some urging before they would fall in with the plan, but after a little delay acceded to it, and presently the division into two parts was made, Kent of course remaining with his father.



" 'There they are!' cried Kent."

Taking the utmost care to conceal their movements, Tokoura's party made their way high up on the rocky slopes until they were well above the ambushed robbers.

Meanwhile Colonel Stannard led his men along the bottom of the defile to within short range of the place where it narrowed again.

Then he halted, awaiting the agreed-upon signal from Tokoura.

It came in the form of a volley whose report was redoubled by the echoing cliffs, producing a most startling effect, and the next moment the Kolos appeared as if they had risen out of the rocks.

"There they are!" cried Kent, pointing excitedly at them as if no one had discovered them but himself. "Shall we give them a volley?"

Colonel Stannard nodded assent, and then their rifles rang out ere the reverberations of the first discharge had ceased.

The effect upon the robbers of this double attack was to send them into a regular panic. They probably thought that the caravan had somehow received reinforcement, and terrified at thus being caught between two fires, they fired one scattering volley which did no harm, and incontinently betook themselves to flight.

Lest they should change their mind Colonel Stannard sent another round after them, and then gave orders for the animals to be brought up without delay.

"We must press through this pass as quickly as

possible," he said, "for the rascals may get over their fright, and come at us again."

Accordingly the animals were driven at their utmost speed, a sharp look-out being kept up until at last the end of the defile was reached, and the caravan passed out on to the open ground where all fear of attack was over.

Colonel Stannard praised Tokoura warmly for his plan, and for the success with which it was carried out.

"We may congratulate ourselves heartily on having thus got rid of the scoundrels," he said. "Let us hope they will profit by this experience to leave us alone for the future."

As nothing further was seen of this band of robbers it would seem that they did take the lesson to heart.

Nor did any other of their kind venture to try conclusions with the redoubtable colonel during the remainder of the journey.

Beyond the mountain range the country greatly improved, becoming more level and fertile until at last they were in the midst of the magnificent pasturage of the Ko-Ko-Nor, where the rich grass rose to the stomachs of the camels.

Ere sunset they had reached the borders of the Blue Sea, and Kent, looking out across its mighty bosom, exclaimed enthusiastically :

"What a splendid sight! How it does one good after all those dreary deserts and tiresome mountains."

The Ko-Ko-Nor, as its waters rippled and gleamed

under the rays of the western sun, was indeed a beautiful picture, and a welcome change to one whose eyes had wearied of rock and sand.

More than one hundred leagues in circumference, its farther shores were beyond the reach of vision, and one could easily imagine he was standing on the verge of the ocean itself, particularly as the blue water was bitter and salt, in spite of the many sweet streams pouring into it.

"We shall halt here for a couple of days, so as to give our animals a good rest and feed," said Colonel Stannard, a command that met with the entire approval of every member of the party, whether biped or quadruped.

The region of the Ko-Ko-Nor was occupied by Mongols, who raised immense herds of cattle in spite of being exposed to the depredations of the Si-Fan, or Eastern Tibetans, who came from the Bayen-Kharat mountains toward the sources of the Yellow River.

Being constantly under the necessity of defending their lives and possessions from the raids of the Si-Fan, the Mongols had become most brave and warlike. At any hour of the day or night they were ready for battle. They tended their cattle on horseback, lance in hand, musket at back, and sword at belt.

A large party of them had their tents not far from where Colonel Stannard encamped, and they came over to visit the travellers, who were favourably impressed by their fine, manly bearing and frank, hearty manner.

Tokoura gave them an excellent reputation for honesty, and so they were permitted to make themselves at home and to ask as many questions as they pleased.

Kent conceived quite a liking for them, and by way of a little diversion, set himself to arranging some races between them and the Khalkas, who were wont to boast a great deal about the speed of their horses and their own equestrian skill.

With Tokoura's aid this was easily accomplished, and the following afternoon fixed for the event.

A great stretch of level plain lay near the camps, and here the race-course was set out in such a way that the competitors would start from the lake shore and return to it after rounding a lance bearing a banner which was stuck into the ground half-a-mile distant.

The spectators would therefore have a full view of the whole race from start to finish.

The scene was one of great animation and excitement when the time for the races drew near. There were to be three events, different men and horses taking part in each, and the winning of two to settle the question of superiority.

Kent constituted himself sole referee, with Champ and Bunty as his clerks of the course and Tokoura as starter. Colonel Stannard, although fully entering into the spirit of the thing, preferred to be a mere spectator.

"It's all your own arranging, Kent," he said, when urged to take some prominent part, "and you had

better carry it through without me. You'll get all the more fun out of it."

Looking very important, and determined to have everything done in the regulation style, Kent bustled about on his little black mare, giving directions with all the dignity of a veteran official.

The first pair of contestants gave a lot of trouble. Both they and their mounts were quivering with excitement, and so fearful were the riders lest one should take some advantage of the other, that it seemed as if it would be impossible to get them off on even terms.

Kent quite lost patience as one false start succeeded another.

"Confound you fellows!" he cried angrily. "Why can't you play fair? It's no use trying to fool me. I'm not going to let you away until you're in a line."

At last they gave up their efforts to steal a lead, and got off well together.

The contest was a very exciting one, now the Mongol and then the Khalka being ahead, until they were within a hundred yards of the finish, when, by a bit of clever riding almost worthy of Epsom, the Mongol passed his rival, and won by half a length, amid the delighted shouts of his fellow-tribesmen.

The second race proved an easy thing for the Khalka, who was much better mounted than the Mongol; but in the third race fortune changed again, and the Mongol got home first.

By this time Kent was completely carried away with the spirit of the thing. He resented the Mongols

having won the day, and although such had not been his intention at the outset, he was determined to see if he could not redeem the honour of their party.

"Have you any objections to my seeing what I can do, father?" he asked of Colonel Stannard.

"Not in the least, my boy, so long as you do not come a cropper and break your neck," was the smiling response.

"Very well, then, Tokoura, tell them to bring out their best horse and man, and I'll have a brush with them," said Kent, bracing himself up.

Tokoura delivered the challenge, which was received with a chorus of approval, and presently there appeared a beautiful white horse, ridden by a young man not much Kent's senior.

"Behold the chief's horse, and his son upon it," said Tokoura impressively. "May Buddha grant you success, for they say he rides like the wind."

Kent fully realized that he had no light task before him, and his boyish face was grave enough as he tightened the girths of his saddle and saw to it that the bit and bridle were rightly adjusted.

Colonel Stannard had offered him his big steed, but Kent thought it best to take his own little mare. She was as fleet as any of their horses, and thoroughly understood him, so that he was sure to get the best out of her, which he could not rely upon doing with a strange mount.

When the rivals stood side by side the Mongol seemed to have every advantage, and Kent, down in

the bottom of his heart, felt very anxious about the result.

But he assumed the most cheerful, confident look he could command, and kept his impatient little animal well in hand while awaiting Tokoura's signal to start.

CHAPTER XXVIII

IN PERILOUS PLACES

KENT and the Mongol got away on perfectly even terms, and for a quarter of a mile kept neck and neck, both horses pulling hard on the bit in their anxiety to outstrip each other. The mare took a shorter stride than the horse, but made up for it by a quicker action ; and as they swept along side by side, Kent's spirits began to brighten, his clever little mount seemed to find it so easy to hold her own against her larger rival.

But as they neared the turning-point, the Mongol, being evidently determined to be the first around, let his horse out, and drew away foot by foot.

Thinking it too soon to challenge him for the lead, Kent kept on steadily until a gap of a length was opened between them, and then he loosened his reins a little.

The mare instantly took the hint and quickened her pace, so as to bring her nose up to the Mongol's quarter, whereupon the latter put on a spurt in his turn.

They were now within a short distance of the

bannered lance, and Kent, knowing that if he approached at full speed it would be impossible to make a sharp turn, pulled hard on his mare, letting the Mongol dash ahead of him.

It was a shrewd action, and amply justified by the result, for when they did reach the lance, the Mongol overshot it considerably, while Kent made so short a turn that on straightening out for home he had not only caught up what he had been behind, but gained a promising lead.

The real struggle now began. Straight and clear stretched the run home, with the eager, excited crowd dancing and shouting about the finish. The two intelligent, high-spirited horses were no less wrought up than their riders, and needed neither whip nor spur to inspire them.

Contrasted as they were in colour and size, the difference in speed and wind was manifestly slight, and Kent, as he leaned well forward on his mare's shoulder, and spoke encouragingly to her, felt the conviction that if he rode his best he would not be beaten.

The Mongol did not keep himself in hand so well as Kent did. The loss of his lead at the turn irritated him, and in his impatience to regain it he rode too fiercely, punishing his horse with his heavy riding-whip and digging in the cruel spurs until the animal's snowy flanks were stained with blood.

Yet by dint of these harsh measures he forced himself up to even terms with Kent, and threatened to pass him, when his horse stumbled slightly, and

he had to rein in sharply to escape a nasty fall.

This, as may be supposed, did not tend to improve his temper. Kent being once more a length in advance made him simply furious, and with many curses, in his own barbarous lingo, he plied whip and spur mercilessly.

They were now within a couple of hundred yards of the goal, and Kent thought it time to call upon his mount for a strenuous spurt that would carry him to victory.

The game little mare, although already well spent by her exertions, responded wonderfully. Instead of lashing her with the whip he helped her at every stride, suiting the movement of his body to her brave bounds.

On came the big white horse, still far from exhausted. Judiciously ridden he could not fail to win, and Colonel Stannard, realizing this, called out :

“Lift her, Kent! lift her! Don’t go to the whip!”

Not a word of this did Kent hear, for the thunder of his opponent’s approach drowned even the colonel’s stentorian tones. Yet he acted just as if he had. Holding the reins close, he lifted the little mare with a true jockey’s skill, saving her strength to the utmost.

Fifty yards from the finish the white horse’s nose was at his knees, and Kent’s heart sank as he saw the power of the creature’s stride. But he was not going to be beaten at the post in the sight of all his friends. Rising in his stirrups, he shouted :

"Now then, my beauty, now for it," and pulled on the reins as though he would lift the mare clear off the ground.

She understood the words and the action. She gathered her energies for one final supreme effort, and fairly flung herself across the finish line the winner by a scant head.

Great were the rejoicings of all the members of the caravan at Kent's gallant victory. Even the Khalkas seemed consoled for the defeat of their own champion.

As for Kent himself, he was in high feather. The black mare was now dearer to him than ever, and as he patted her throbbing neck fondly, he said :

"Well done, my beauty. You're a real trump. I'll take you back to India with me if I can."

The Mongols showed no ill-humour at the result of the race, and ere the Stannard party set out next morning, presented the colonel with a fine sheep, which was gratefully received.

Having traversed the fertile plains of the Ko-Ko-Nor, the caravan entered the territory of the Mongols of Tsaidam, and soon the aspect of the country became entirely changed. Nature, so bountiful and gracious beside the Blue Sea, grew savage and sad as they advanced, the arid, stony soil producing naught save a few dry salt-petrous shrubs.

Two days of tedious travel across this gloomy region brought them to the foot of the Bourhan-Bota Mountain, of whose sinister reputation Colonel Stannard had heard so much that he was full of curiosity to see it for himself.

"Tokoura has a wonderful yarn about this mountain, Kent," he said with a sceptical smile. "According to him it gives forth pestilential vapours which stupefy those attempting its ascent, and sometimes men have lost their lives upon it. I confess I haven't much faith in the story, but we shall soon test its truth."

"We'll have a hard enough job getting over this fellow, anyway," answered Kent, surveying the craggy steep before him, "without being bothered by smothering vapours, so I hope Tokoura and the rest of them have been telling fairy tales."

With due deliberation the ascent was begun, although a thin, light vapour clung about the mountain side, which Tokoura declared was the perilous exhalation.

For some distance the only difficulty experienced was that caused by the ruggedness of the path; but presently a feeling of intense lassitude and depression came over the climbers. Not only were the men affected, but the animals also. The horses refused to carry their riders, the camels strove to get rid of their packs, and the caravan fell into such confusion that farther progress seemed impracticable.

"Tokoura was right," Colonel Stannard confessed, as, halting for a minute, he considered what was best to be done. "The mountain undoubtedly gives off carbonic acid gas, whatever may be the reason, and we must get over it as rapidly as possible.

To say this was one thing, to accomplish it another. The members of the party, without exception, were

suffering as from severe sea-sickness. They could not advance a few yards without falling down, and yet they must needs get both themselves and the animals, which were equally enfeebled, to ascend the steep and rugged pass that was the only way of escape.

It was all like some dreadful nightmare to Kent, whose feet felt like lead, and who found his hands full with the task of compelling his mare to keep moving instead of lying down as if to die.

For a full hour the terrible struggle continued, the men frequently falling and getting up again, the beasts groaning and sighing as they stumbled on under the urging of their drivers, until at last all farther advance seemed utterly hopeless, and the whole party doomed to death in the fatal atmosphere.

Hitherto there had not been a breath of wind ; but happily, just when the condition of the caravan became desperate, a breeze sprang up in the north that blew strongly upon the mountain side.

Its influence was immediate and magical. The noxious gas, instead of filling the lungs of the caravan, was borne harmlessly away, and as the fresh, pure air took its place both man and beast quickly revived. Their strength and spirit came back to them, and they attacked the steep ascent with a vigour that carried them right on to the summit of the pass, whence they rapidly made their way to the plain below.

“ Well, Tokoura,” said the colonel to the guide, “ I shall not be so quick to scoff at your alarming

tales another time, for certainly this horrible mountain deserved all you had said about it."

Tokoura smiled in the quiet, dry manner that was so characteristic of him.

"Bourhan-Bota is bad, but Chuga is more bad," he said sententiously. "When we come to Chuga we must all pray for a safe passage."

"Tut, Tokoura, you are simply trying to frighten us," responded the colonel in a somewhat impatient tone. "You don't mean to say that there is still worse travelling ahead of us?"

Tokoura shrugged his shoulders and smiled inscrutably.

"We will come to Chuga presently," he said. "Then you will see if Tokoura does not speak what is true."

Yet when they did reach this mountain, so much to be feared, they were indeed inclined at first to think that the veteran guide had exaggerated its terrors.

This was because they approached it on the side where it was least steep and comparatively free from snow, so that they gained the summit without excessive exertion, and Kent, in his impulsive way, exclaimed triumphantly :

"Here we are now, right at the top! It wasn't such an awful job, after all."

But he soon had occasion to change his tune, for the sky, which had hitherto been clear, became thickly overcast with clouds, and the wind began to blow with increasing violence.

To make matters worse, this side of the mountain was covered with deep snow, in which the animals sank to their girths, and through which they could advance only by a series of leaps that quickly exhausted their strength.

The cold was intense, threatening to freeze the faces of the men, and compelling many of them to ride with their backs to the pitiless wind.

Despite the thick furs in which he was wrapped, Kent suffered acutely, and for the first time felt regretful at being in such an expedition. He rightly enough judged that this was only the beginning of their miseries and that much more of the same sort of thing would have to be endured ere they reached their destination.

In their convulsive efforts to get through the deep snow, several of the pack animals lost their footing altogether, and plunged into the chasms which yawned to receive them, where they had to be left to miserably perish.

Fortunately none of these were Colonel Stannard's, but all belonged to the Khalkas, who made much ado over their loss. With indescribable difficulty, and at the cost of many frost-bites, the caravan finally got to the foot of the mountain, and at once its members sought refuge from the merciless wind for themselves and their animals in the numerous defiles which pierced the range.

"Oh, for a good fire, a hot supper, and a nice warm bed!" exclaimed Kent as, thoroughly wearied, he threw himself down in the lee of a cliff.

"I'm afraid you'll have to manage somehow without any of the three, my boy," said his father, giving him an affectionate pat on the shoulder. "If our men can gather enough argols to melt some snow and make us a cup of tea it is the best we can expect until we get out of this miserable place."

The camel men sought diligently beneath the snow for the only fuel that was to be had, and by dint of hard work succeeded in securing a small quantity, with which a poor little fire was made and some weak tea was brewed.

"It's just a little better than nothing," sighed Kent as he drank the tepid decoction, and tried to satisfy the pangs of hunger with a tasteless mess of tsamba.

Beyond Mount Chuga stretched the awful deserts of Tibet, and all that the travellers had endured in the preceding part of their journey was as nothing in comparison with what now awaited them. As the caravan advanced the ground continued to rise, vegetation to decrease, and the cold to become more intense. The want of water and of nourishing pasture soon told upon the pack animals, and each day one or more had to be abandoned because in their enfeebled condition they could drag themselves no farther.

All along the route lay the skeletons of horses and camels that had fallen by the way. Nor were these the only mournful tokens, for here and there were human bones, showing that still more precious lives had paid the penalty of braving these terrible deserts.

The effect of such sights could not fail to be sorely

depressing, and stolid silence pervaded the caravan save when the drivers snarled at their stumbling charges.

No day was free from wind, and snow squalls fell frequently. In fact, the elements seemed to be doing their very utmost to overcome the daring travellers, and to add them to their already long list of unfortunate victims.

CHAPTER XXIX

DRAWING NEARER TO DEATH

DURING day after day of tremendous toil and incessant discomfort the caravan struggled on, crossing the Bayen-Kharat Mountains into the broad valley beyond, where a halt of some duration was made on the banks of a river called by the Tibetans Polee-Tchan (river of the Lord), but known in China as the Yang-Tse-Kiang (Blue River).

When they were approaching the river Kent's attention was attracted by a number of black objects scattered over the surface of the ice, having a very curious appearance.

"I wonder what these can be?" he said to his father. "They look so strange; I must find out."

Accordingly, as soon as they reached the river, he hastened to cross the ice where the black objects lay, and to his amazement found that they were the heads of yaks, whose bodies were imbedded in the ice.

"How could this have happened?" he asked in wonderment at so extraordinary a spectacle.

"I think it must have been in this way," answered the colonel. "These poor creatures have attempted

to swim across the river just when the ice was forming, and their thick coats have got so clogged with it that they could not move, and so they have frozen to death with only their heads above the ice, which has been their winding-sheet."

Kent was deeply affected by the sight. Not only did he feel sorry for the animals that had thus miserably perished, but the thought came home to him :

"If these yaks, which belong to this country and are so wonderfully well protected against its cruel cold, can thus be lost, what chance have we of getting safely to our journey's end?"

Colonel Stannard noticed the grave expression of his countenance, and rightly divining the cause, said cheeringly :

"Don't let this make you despondent, Kent. So strange a thing might not occur again in a lifetime, and the pitiful fate of these poor brutes is not going to be ours. We shall pull through all right, never fear, even though we may have some hard times yet ahead of us."

Kent brightened up at this, and responded in quite a brave tone :

"Of course we will, father. It's absurd of one to get the blues like this. All the same, I'll be awfully glad when we come to another town where we can be inside a house again. Living in tents in these Arctic regions isn't just the sort of thing I like best."

So abundant was the supply of argols at this camping-place that they could have fine big fires, and

were enabled to enjoy steaming bowls of tea and tsamba whenever they felt inclined, which strengthened them to endure the incessant cold with a little more equanimity.

After crossing the river, they came to a mountainous region in which both wild yaks and wild asses were met with in large numbers.

The animals were so strikingly different in their appearance that it seemed strange they should be denizens of the same region, the yak being as shaggy, clumsy, awkward, and ugly as the ass was trim, graceful, active, and handsome.

The ass at full speed could distance the swiftest Tartar or Tibetan horsemen, but the yak, with its slow, lumbering gait could almost be overtaken on foot.

No less different were they in nature than in appearance, the yak being full of courage and ferocity when attacked, its magnificent horns forming most effective weapons, while the ass was an arrant coward, fleeing at the mere sight of man.

Kent, as a matter of course, could not be content until he had tried his huntsman's skill in bringing down at least one of each ; but he had to possess his soul in patience for some time before the opportunity came to gratify his desires. He bagged his yak first. One day Tokoura, who knew his wish and who had been riding on ahead, hurried back to report that he had seen a fine, big yak licking nitre in a hollow of the rocks where he could be easily approached.

"That's good news!" exclaimed Kent joyfully.

"We must do our best to get him. Come along, Bunty, and you too, Herc. You can help."

Having seen to it that their repeating rifles were duly charged, they set out under Tokoura's guidance, and after a sharp walk of fifteen minutes, reached the place where the yak had been seen. He was still there enjoying the nitre as a child would a lump of candy, and so deeply engrossed in his pleasant employment that they had no difficulty in getting within close range undiscovered by him.

"What a splendid fellow he is!" Kent whispered to Bunty. "Just look at his horns, and what a magnificent coat!"

The yak was in truth a perfect specimen of his kind, a bull in the prime of his strength and a noble prize for any sportsman.

Kent trembled with eagerness as he took aim behind the huge creature's shoulders. "I'll fire first," he said, "and if I don't bring him down, then you fire."

Waiting until he had steadied somewhat, he pulled the trigger, and then in his impatience to see the result, stepped forward from behind the boulder which had been concealing him.

The instant the bullet struck him the yak whirled around, and catching sight of Kent, who was in full view, charged at him, bellowing furiously.

"Fire, Bunty; fire at once!" Kent cried, at the same time preparing for a second shot himself.

But the yak, stung to fury by the bullet, which had not reached a vital part, was now rushing at him with

lowered head, and when he fired, his bullet, striking full in the massive front, flattened itself harmlessly there, without staying the animal's advance in the least.

There was nothing for Kent to do but flee, and this he did as fast as the broken character of the ground permitted, the yak, despite the fire of both Bunty and Tokoura, thundering after him at an amazing pace for so clumsy a creature.

On level ground Kent could easily have distanced his pursuer, but the treacherous rocks hindered him greatly, and presently he tripped over one of them, falling flat on his face.

At this Bunty gave a cry of horror and sprang forward to his aid, but so close was the infuriated yak that Kent would have been under his hoofs ere the Goorkha could interpose had not help come from another quarter.

Tokoura had been holding Hercules by the collar until the moment when the yak turned upon Kent. Then he released him, and at once the mastiff rushed into the fight. He was just in time to hurl himself at the yak's head and fasten his teeth in the brute's black muzzle. Thus assailed by a new enemy, the bull completely forgot Kent and devoted his whole attention to the dog.

Although somewhat the worse for his fall upon the rocks, Kent quickly regained his feet, and forgetting his bruises in his concern for Hercules, ran right to the yak, pressed the muzzle of his rifle into his thick hair, and did not stop pulling the trigger until the cartridge chamber was empty.

Yet such amazing tenacity of life had this extraordinary creature that even this fearful bombardment did not have an immediate effect.

Although the blood gushed from its many wounds it maintained the fight with the mastiff for some time longer. Indeed, there were moments when Kent trembled for his dog, and cried to Bunty and Tokoura to pour more bullets into his apparently unconquerable antagonist.

At last, however, the mighty frame began to weaken under so tremendous a loss of blood. Down sank the bull upon its knees, the huge head drooped pitifully, the breath came in convulsive gasps, bloody foam issued from his mouth, and then, with one long, gurgling bellow, the noble animal rolled over, dead beyond a peradventure.

Kent was jubilant at his success. He lavished praises upon Hercules, upon Bunty, upon Tokoura, and accepted them for himself with smiling complacency.

"Now," he said, "for a wild ass, and then I shall be satisfied." A couple of days later he was able to gratify this desire also.

One morning at daybreak a Khalka came into the Stannards' tent to tell that a number of wild asses had joined the horses of the caravan at pasturage, and were gambolling about among them as if tempting them to run off with them.

"There is your chance now, Kent," said Colonel Stannard. "See if you cannot stalk one of them before breakfast."

Kent lost no time in turning out, rifle in hand, and accompanied only by the Khalka, he hastened to the scene.

"You see them?" said the Khalka, pointing to where the horses and camels were scattered over the plain. "They are there. We must not let them see us."

To get near enough without being discovered was no easy task, the wild asses having great keenness of sight and scent.

Indeed, Kent could hardly have accomplished it without availing himself of a stratagem that occurred to him at the moment. His mare was grazing near at hand, and he called her to him softly. The intelligent creature promptly obeyed, and getting on her back he lay out flat after the manner of the Red Indian. Then with his hands and voice he directed the mare toward the herd from which the wind blew to him, so that his scent was not carried to the wild asses.

By this device he got within a hundred yards ere the asses took alarm, and before they could dash away a well-aimed shot brought down one of the finest of the band.

Kent's satisfaction was now complete. He had secured both a wild yak and a wild ass, and in each case a splendid specimen of its kind.

"What a pity we cannot preserve the heads and skins to take home with us," he said regretfully to his father. "How well they would look if properly mounted!"

"No doubt they would, my boy," responded the

colonel; "but if we were to undertake to make a collection of all the strange and striking things we've met with on this journey, we'd need several hundred camels to carry our stuff. As it is, I'm afraid we shall have to be content mainly with what we can carry away in our heads."

The very worst part of their journey was now to come. Each day's advance brought them nearer the highest region of Upper Asia, and the rarefied atmosphere made exertion harder to bear, while the cold, if possible, grew more intense.

To make matters still worse, a strong north wind arose, and blew day after day with pitiless persistence. The weather was perfectly clear and the sun shone brightly, but its rays afforded little or no warmth even at noon. The effect of the continuous cold wind upon the faces and hands of the members of the caravan were appalling. The skin shrivelled and cracked until the men looked more like mummies than living persons, and their sufferings were so great that they could hardly sleep at night, however wearied they might be.

In order to save the horses, which could not stand cold so well as the camels and yaks, they were wrapped around with pieces of carpet, which gave them a ridiculous appearance, but enabled them to keep from freezing to death.

To add to the difficulties of the route there were numerous rivers to be crossed upon the ice, and at these the camels gave a tremendous lot of trouble.

They had a mortal terror of smooth ice, and in

order to induce them to go upon it, there had to be sand or dust strewn over the surface, or a rough path made by cutting with hatchets.

Even then the clumsy, timid, stubborn brutes must needs be led across one by one, causing a long delay at each crossing-place.

For a whole week this fearful struggle against the opposing forces of nature continued, and more than once Colonel Stannard felt tempted to be despondent as to the issue, and to question the wisdom of his having undertaken such an adventure.

The climax seemed to be reached when the icy hand of death laid hold of the men. One of the camel-drivers was the first to succumb. He was missing when the caravan halted in the afternoon, and Champ and Bunty went back to look for him. They found the poor fellow sitting on a stone with his head sunk on his chest, and as motionless as a statue. His face was as colourless as wax, his eyes were half-open, and icicles hung from his nose and mouth.

With great difficulty they got him on a horse, and brought him to the camp. But when his companions saw him they shook their heads, saying :

“ It is of no use. He is frozen. He will die. You have had your trouble for nothing.”

And sure enough the man died during the night, in spite of all efforts to save him.

Each day thereafter other such deaths followed, until Colonel Stannard asked himself when his turn and that of Kent would come. So far they had both

bore up against the hardship and suffering wonderfully well, but the limit of their endurance was drawing near. If the merciless cold and wind continued many days longer, they too would have to succumb and add their bones to the ghastly memorials of preceding travellers which whitened this dreadful desert.

CHAPTER XXX

L'HASA AT LAST

HAPPILY, ere the cold had conquered, there came a blessed change in the weather. The wind, which had blown so long and fiercely from the north, first moderated, then ceased altogether, and after a brief period of calm, indescribably welcome, was succeeded by a south wind, which blew softly and brought balm to the suffering travellers.

The effect upon man and beast was wonderful. The torpid blood once more coursed freely through the veins, the drooping spirits revived, strength returned to the exhausted limbs ; instead of the stolid silence there was talk and even laughter, and grim despair vanished, not again to return.

Not only so, but pressing forward with increased speed, they passed out of the unpeopled wilderness into a region where encampments of black tents, surrounded by great herds of yaks, were frequently encountered, and presently they came to the large village of No-Ptchu, which, although only a collection of mud houses, was a very welcome sight, as it meant rest and refreshment.

Here the camels were exchanged for yaks, the extremely rough character of the country between No-Ptchu and L'hasa rendering the employment of yaks as pack animals necessary, and this having been satisfactorily arranged, the journey was resumed.

The road proved very rocky and laborious, and the passage of the Koiran chain of mountains fatiguing in the highest degree; but, as they advanced, the hearts of the travellers grew lighter, for they were coming into an increasingly populous country.

The black tents that specked the landscape, the numerous parties of pilgrims either repairing to or retiring from L'hasa, the numberless inscriptions engraved on the stones and cliffs by the way, all served to interest and entertain the Stannards, who now felt no doubt as to the success of their enterprise.

At Pampon, a rich plain which is separated from L'hasa only by a mountain, they were surprised to find large farmhouses with snowy-white walls surrounded by fine trees, and surmounted by little towers, from which floated vari-coloured banners bearing Tibetan inscriptions.

Their whole appearance manifested prosperity and peace, and after the horrors of the deserts, they presented a wonderfully attractive picture to eyes wearied of desolation and solitude.

Having rested for a day in Pampon, the caravan essayed the ascent of the mountain, which was the last barrier between it and its goal.

This proved an arduous and difficult climb, but they accomplished it without mishap, and the sun

was setting amid a blaze of golden glory when, attaining the summit, the Stannards beheld in full view before them the mysterious metropolis of the Buddhist world, to reach which they had braved so many perils and endured so many hardships.

“Thank God, our goal is in sight!” exclaimed Colonel Stannard, reverently baring his head, in which act Kent at once followed him. “What a noble and beautiful city it seems. I wonder how we shall be received.”

Viewed from the mountain-top, L’hasa, with its encircling girdle of evergreen trees, its tall, white houses bearing still loftier towers, its multitudinous temples with their glittering gilt roofs, and, surpassing all in size and splendour, the grand palace of the Talé-lama, assuredly presented a majestic and impressive sight.

Kent regarded it with immense satisfaction. There now was the end of their dangerous, wearisome journey; there surely comfort and abundance might be had that would compensate for the misery and privation of the past; and there too, no doubt, were a thousand and one curious and novel things to be seen and heard, which no foreign eye had looked upon nor foreign ear heard since the worthy French *abbés* were banished from the city.

“I’m so glad,” he murmured, with a sigh of relief. “I do hope we shall stay a good long time at L’hasa. I feel as if I didn’t want to go caravaning again for a year.”

Colonel Stannard smiled in an amused way as he

responded : " You're too sanguine, I fear, as to how we shall be treated. Perhaps they will deal very harshly with us."

" Oh, no, surely not, after we have come so far to see the city and have had such trouble in getting here," said Kent earnestly.

" I'm afraid the lamas won't take that into account if they're disposed to be disagreeable," returned his father. " But let us hope for the best."

Descending the mountain side, they reached the plain below, to be met by a troop of horsemen heavily armed, by whom their farther progress was stayed.

In command of the troop was a richly-dressed lama, who, advancing a little, demanded of the strangers who they were, whence they came, and what was their purpose.

Through Tokoura, Colonel Stannard made answer: " We are children of the great white queen. We have come from her dominions, and our mission is one of peace, for the fame of your beautiful city having reached us, we have journeyed hither through many dangers and much suffering."

The lama looked very grave and shook his head in a way that manifested decided disapproval.

" Stay ye here," he commanded. " Advance not one step farther at the peril of your lives," and commanding one-half of his men to see that his order was obeyed, he rode back to the city, leaving the Stannards in a state of considerable perturbation.

" Not a particularly promising reception, Kent,"

said Colonel Stannard, looking very grave. "What do you think of it, Tokoura ?" turning to the guide.

Tokoura hung down his head in significant silence. He did not like the looks of things, but he did not want to admit it.

Oppressed with apprehension, they awaited the return of the lama. An hour passed before he reappeared, and this time he was accompanied by two other lamas, evidently of superior rank.

Their countenances manifested displeasure, and the tone of their voices was hoarse and repellent as they put a number of questions to Tokoura, who answered them in the most submissive manner.

The three lamas then consulted together for some minutes, all the time ignoring Colonel Stannard and Kent, just as if they were unaware of their presence.

Having reached a decision, they announced it to Tokoura. The strangers were to surrender themselves into their hands unreservedly, to give up all their arms and ammunition, their animals and baggage, and were in fact to be treated as prisoners until the mind of the Talé-lama should be made known concerning them.

On these terms being communicated to Colonel Stannard, his first impulse was to protest vigorously. Then he restrained himself.

"Let us do as we are bid," he said to Kent, who was regarding him with an anxious, inquiring face. "These lamas are only subordinates after all. Our case is not in their hands. We will say nothing until we are brought before the real authorities."

Accordingly Tokoura was instructed to say that they would for the present agree to do as desired of them, but that they would hold the lamas strictly accountable for what they surrendered.

Then the whole five of them, Colonel Stannard, Kent, Tokoura, Champ, and Bunty, not forgetting Hercules, who seemed very much puzzled at the proceedings, accompanied the lamas back to the city.

"This is not precisely a triumphal progress," said the colonel with a grim smile, as they passed up a broad and fairly clean street lined on both sides with large, lofty houses, whose snowy walls and decorated window and door frames gave them a very fine appearance. "We are seemingly destined for a prison rather than a palace."

But it was not precisely a prison to which they were conducted, although it fell far short of being a palace.

After penetrating a long way into the city, their guards brought them to a large house having on the outside a narrow, steep staircase, innocent of railing, that led to the third storey. This staircase they were bidden to ascend, and having done so with exceeding caution, for a fall from it would certainly have been attended with serious consequences, they found themselves in a large, lofty apartment with a smaller one opening off it.

A square window on the north-east side fitted with stout wooden bars, and a small, round skylight in the roof, both of them destitute of glass, supplied light

and air, and also permitted the wind, snow, and rain to enter when they were so disposed.

Other than a brick stove in the small room, and an earthen vessel for burning argols in the large room, there was absolutely no furniture, and on seeing this Colonel Stannard at once asked that their saddles, rugs, carpets, and other personal baggage should be sent up to them.

"You do not wish us to perish of the cold, I presume," he said in a polite yet firm tone, "and will therefore have no objection to our being as comfortable as the circumstances will permit."

The lama in charge of them made no reply to this, and presently went away, after carefully securing the door on the outside.

"A needless precaution, that," said the colonel bitterly. "Though the door was left wide open we would not stir, for what could we do? We are absolutely in their power."

"And do you think they will harm us?" asked Kent anxiously. "They certainly look cross enough, but it may be only their way."

"God only knows, my boy, what they will do with us," responded his father. "It all depends upon the Talé-lama. We shall not know until we have been before him."

The room was wretchedly cold, and Tokoura hastened to make a fire in the brick stove. The only fuel was the inevitable dried dung, which furnished far more smoke than heat, but by dint of using it liberally they succeeded in warming the

smaller room tolerably, and they all gathered in there.

Tokoura was plied with questions as to what he thought of the situation, but he could throw little light upon it. He evidently felt considerably concerned at being included in the lama's displeasure, and was disposed to regret having been the instrument of bringing foreigners to the sacred city, since it seemed to be so serious an offence.

Late in the afternoon the lama returned accompanied by two servants bearing food and water, which the prisoners were very glad to see.

Tokoura tried hard to elicit some information from him as to how long they were to be kept in confinement, and when they would be taken before the Talé-lama, but he could get no satisfaction from the man, who seemed a saturnine sort of individual, to whom it was a positive pleasure to be disobliging.

"He's nothing but a mean old chump!" exclaimed Kent indignantly, when, after being again spoken to about having the Stannards' belongings sent up to them, and again refusing to give any satisfaction, he took himself off, looking as important as if he were the Talé-lama himself.

Tokoura having with the aid of Bunty prepared a tolerable meal, they managed to forget their grievances for a time while they appeased their hunger and enjoyed a good smoke.

But then came the night and the piercing cold, which filled the big room, and compelled them all to crawl into the little chamber where the brick

stove gave out just enough heat to keep their blood in circulation.

Thus, without light, with insufficient warmth, destitute of anything that might soften the hard floor, and filled with apprehension as to their fate, they spent a most miserable night.

CHAPTER XXXI

TREMBLING IN THE BALANCE

IT was upon a weary, anxious little group that the next day dawned, and while Tokoura was busy over the stove, Colonel Stannard and Kent walked up and down the big room in earnest conversation.

“I shall demand an audience of the Talé-lama this very day,” said the colonel in his most determined tone. “This sort of treatment is not to be endured. These fellows must understand that a British officer who has come on a peaceable mission is not to be dealt with as if he were a criminal.”

As he spoke, the door opened and a lama they had not seen before entered. Judging by both his dress and bearing he was of a higher rank than the others, and Colonel Stannard noted with a thrill of hope that he had a much more intelligent and amiable expression.

His features were of the true Mongol type, but his complexion was as light as an Englishman’s, and the unusual cleanliness of his countenance showed that he took pride in his white skin. Bowing politely he

began at once to speak, and Tokoura hastened forward to interpret.

He asked a number of questions as to the *personnel* and purpose of the party, showing special interest in Kent, who was probably the first English boy he had ever seen, and Colonel Stannard having answered them all frankly and fully, the lama then inquired how they had been treated and if they needed anything.

This gave the colonel his opportunity, and in a voice vibrant with indignation, he detailed the gross courtesy that had been shown them, and protested warmly against such conduct toward an officer of her Majesty, the Queen of Great Britain.

The lama listened with grave attention, but saying nothing until Colonel Stannard had finished, when, after a brief silence, he replied in substance as follows: "You must know that according to the decree of the Talé-lama you have forfeited your lives by coming to L'hasa, for this is the most sacred city in the world, and no white unbelievers are permitted to visit it. Your guide should have known this, and because he has conducted you thither his life is forfeited likewise. Yet that is no reason why until the sentence is executed you should not receive due consideration, for we are not barbarians," and here the lama drew himself up proudly; "we are children of Buddha; and I assure you that what you wish shall be granted you."

Whereupon once more bowing politely he withdrew, leaving the Stannard party in a state of pro-

found dejection, which not even the colonel sought to conceal.

The lama had spoken of their lives being forfeited in such a tone of absolute certainty that it seemed as if all hope of escape from death must be abandoned.

An hour after the lama's departure everything for which Colonel Stannard asked, together with a fresh supply of food and fuel, was brought up, and the prisoners were able to arrange for comfort of body at least.

They had no further visitors that day, but early the following morning the lama reappeared and bade them prepare to accompany him to the palace of the Talé-lama.

"I am glad the summons has come," said Colonel Stannard. "Anything is better than this terrible suspense, and I cannot believe that after the Talé-lama has listened to me he will dare to take our lives."

"Indeed he won't," spoke up Kent, who cherished a beautiful faith in his father and believed him equal to any emergency. "You will talk to him so that he will treat us properly and not in this shameful way."

All the members of the party having donned their best attire, Colonel Stannard putting on a uniform that he had brought with him for just such an occasion, they left their prison-house, hoping for the best.

At the foot of the stairs horses were in waiting for

them, also a detachment of mounted soldiers, guarded by whom they set off at an easy trot for the palace of the Talé-lama.

They were taken through the principal streets, in which a motley throng presenting a wonderful variety of physiognomies, costumes, and languages was ardently occupied in the grand business of buying and selling, for the commercial activities of L'hasa were hardly less important than the religious ones, and the bustling traders vied in numbers with the pious pilgrims.

But the appearance of the Stannards was the signal for all business to be temporarily suspended, and amid a continuous fire of unsparing stares and un pitying remarks, which Kent found excessively trying, particularly as on account of the crowd no faster pace than a walk was practicable, the captives were conducted through the length of the city.

"We are being exhibited as a spectacle, I believe," said the colonel, his eyes flashing indignantly.

And he was right in his surmise, the lama in charge of them having taken this means of showing his own importance, while at the same time affording his fellow-citizens a little harmless amusement.

But at last the ordeal came to an end, for, leaving the staring, jeering crowds behind, they reached the suburbs of the city, where only a few people were to be seen.

Thus far the buildings had differed only in size, being precisely alike in structure, but now Kent's attention was attracted by a group of houses whose

appearance was so extraordinary that he pointed them out to Tokoura, asking, "What can those be built of? They look awfully queer." Tokoura smiled as he answered :

"No wonder you are puzzled, for those walls are made out of horns."

Such, indeed, was the case. With the smooth, white horns of oxen and the rough, black horns of sheep arranged in many fantastic designs and firmly set in mortar, the ingenious architects of these curious dwellings had produced a most striking and picturesque effect, while at the same time securing a very solid and durable structure.

The palace of the Talé-lama was not within the city limits. Northward, at the distance of a mile, a rugged elevation of conical form rose from the level plain, like an islet from the bosom of a lake.

This was called Buddha-La (the divine mountain), and upon this natural pedestal the worshippers of the Talé-lama had erected a magnificent abode for the incarnate Buddha they humbly adored.

A fine avenue of superb trees led from L'hasa to the palace, and this was crowded all day long with pilgrims telling the beads of their long Buddhist chaplets, while lamas of the court, richly attired and riding splendidly caparisoned horses, cantered to and fro in all their pride of place and power. But for the shadow of death impending upon them, Colonel Stannard and Kent would have keenly enjoyed this novel and interesting spectacle, and even as it was their thoughts were in a measure taken up by it.

The nearer they drew to the palace the more they were impressed by its size and splendour. It was not a single building, but an aggregation of temples differing in proportion, plan, and decorations, and dominated by one of many stories which overlooked all the others, terminating in a dome entirely overlaid with plates of gold and surrounded by a peristyle whose columns were covered with the same precious metal. Therein abode the Talé-lama, the incarnate Buddha, in the estimation of his worshippers the greatest of all earthly personages, and in actual fact the political and religious head of the Tibetan people.

At the foot of the mountain stood a number of buildings for the accommodation of the lamas in attendance upon his mysterious majesty, and here the party halted, while the lama in charge went on ahead to report his arrival with the foreign intruder into the sacred city.

While he was gone, the Stannards were kept waiting on their horses in the courtyard of one of the buildings, where they were visited by scores of lamas and pilgrims, who manifested little regard for their feelings, walking round about them and making remarks upon them just as if they were some novel species of wild animals on exhibition for their amusement.

"How I should like to teach these barbarians a lesson in good manners," Colonel Stannard growled, as he returned their impertinent inspection with a look of contemptuous disdain. "So surely as we stand here to-day, the time will come when the very

name of Englishman will bring them to their knees."

"I hope we'll be on hand to see it," said Kent, who keenly resented being made their cynosure and would have been delighted to return this attention with his fists if it had been possible to do so.

More than an hour elapsed ere the lama returned, having with him a gorgeously arrayed individual, who was evidently of superior rank, and to whom, with much deference, he indicated the captives.

The new-comer, not deigning to address them directly, then gave some orders, in obedience to which their progress toward the palace was resumed, but now upon foot, the horses being left in the court-yard.

Through a lavishly decorated avenue, thronged with lamas, guards, and menials, they proceeded slowly, until at last they came to the lofty structure which enshrined the mighty personage who held for them the keys of life and death.

Veteran soldier as he was, inured to every kind of danger, Colonel Stannard nevertheless experienced a tightening of the heart, and a profound depression of spirit as they entered the carved and gilded portal.

Instinctively he put his arm on Kent's shoulder, not trusting himself to speak, whereupon Kent threw his arm about his father's waist, and thus the two went forward to their fate, Champ, Bunty, and Tokoura following silently.

Up long flights of stairs and through luxuriously furnished chambers of great size they were conducted

with great ceremony, and at last arrived before a magnificent curtain, which evidently veiled the entrance to the audience chamber.

Here another long wait occurred that tried their self-control sorely, and then the great curtain was drawn aside and they were ushered into the presence of the Talé-lama. Colonel Stannard at once bowed low, Kent following his example, while Tokoura prostrated himself upon the floor, the Sikh and Goorkha promptly imitating him.

But a mere bow, however respectful, did not satisfy the lamas in attendance upon the potentate, and they seized hold of the colonel and Kent and forced them down on their knees.

Despite their indignation at this action, both submitted gracefully, for it was not the time either to resist or protest. Having thus paid their respects, they lifted their eyes and beheld, seated on a glittering throne, arrayed in the most splendid of robes, and surrounded by lamas who vied with each other in the brilliancy of their costumes, a man in the prime of life, of the purest Mongol type, whose pale, sad countenance was utterly destitute of animation.

Having regarded the men thus brought before him with a look of languid interest, he spoke in a low tone to the lama nearest him.

The latter thereupon asked a question of the one who conducted the captives thither, in response to which he touched Tokoura's arm and told him to step forward that he might act as interpreter.

Tokoura, showing great nervousness, crept forward



"They forced them down on their knees."

on his knees, taking care not to lift his eyes to the Talé-lama, and then the latter began his examination of the strangers.

His voice was so low and soft that Colonel Stannard could not distinguish the words, but Tokoura's keen ears missed nothing, and still keeping his head bowed, he translated the questions and the answers returned.

Languid and deliberate as his manner was, the incarnate Buddha took the trouble to put a great many inquiries which showed an active, penetrative mind and a wider knowledge of the outside world than Colonel Stannard anticipated. He wanted to know about the Queen of England, the strength of her army and navy ; how many soldiers she had in India, and how far northward she intended to extend the boundaries of that possession ; whether there was any likelihood of a war between her and the Chinese emperor ; what Russia was going to do in Northern China ; did she intend to seize upon all that part of the empire, and if so, what would England do ? All this and much more did the Talé-lama demand of Colonel Stannard, and not until his desire for information upon these points seemed fully satisfied did he put the inquiries which he had been expected to make first with regard to the colonel's reason for coming to L'hasa in defiance of the strict prohibition of all Europeans.

On being informed that the visitors' only object was exploration and adventure, he shook his head in manifest incredulity.

He knew better than that, he asserted. They had

come to spy out the land, to see whether it was worth conquering, and what was the strength of its resources of defence.

Of course Colonel Stannard denied this at once. He was no spy nor forerunner of invading armies. He had made the journey moved solely by the spirit of travel and without any authority or assistance from the British Government whatever.

His manner and tone were so earnest and sincere that even through the medium of an interpreter his disclaimer impressed the Talé-lama, over whose sallow countenance came an expression of kindlier interest which sent a thrill of hope to the colonel's heart.

Bringing his examination to a close with a few more questions of no apparently special import, he conferred for a few minutes with the lamas who stood by him, and then one of them moving forward, announced that the audience was over and that the strangers should be removed while his ineffable majesty was considering as to their disposition.

So the Stannards returned from the presence of the Talé-lama and were conducted back to their prison house, there to await the declaration of their destiny.

CHAPTER XXXII

RIGHT ABOUT FACE AND HOME AGAIN

“WHAT do you think they will do with us, father?” asked Kent, when they had left the palace. “He surely will not condemn us to death, as that lama said. He does not seem such a dreadful creature, does he?”

“Indeed he does not,” responded the colonel in a more cheerful tone than he had before used. “I have been quite favourably impressed by him, and unless I am greatly mistaken, he has formed a better opinion of us than he had at first. In fact, I feel quite hopeful of his treating us with consideration, in spite of all the dire threats of his subordinates.”

Their leader’s hopefulness communicated itself to the others, and in a very much better spirit they set about making themselves as comfortable as they could in their place of confinement.

Knowing well the slowness of Oriental methods, Colonel Stannard expected to hear nothing further for some days, perhaps, and was therefore quite surprised when the next morning three lamas appeared, none of whom he had seen before, and from their

important bearing he felt sure they carried the commands of the Talé-lama.

Thrilling with anxiety to learn their fate, yet striving hard, and succeeding well in seeming composed, the Stannard party awaited the deliverance of the message.

With provoking but characteristic deliberation the chief lama made a number of formal remarks, and asked some unimportant questions before coming to the main question. At last, drawing himself up, and evidently desiring to make his utterance as impressive as possible, he spoke in substance as follows :

“ It has already been told you that by the laws of the kingdom you have forfeited your lives by daring to intrude into the sacred city, which is forbidden to all foreigners, and the counsel of the lamas was that the penalty should be exacted.” Here he paused and readjusted his flowing robes so as to add especial emphasis to what was to follow. “ But his supreme excellency, the Talé-lama, in whom Buddha is manifested to the world, has been moved to exercise divine clemency toward you upon certain conditions for the faithful performance of which you will give me your solemn pledge. These are, that on all your property being returned to you, you are to leave L’hasa immediately, taking with you nothing which you did not bring ; that you return to your own country with all speed ; and that you make known to the world that if any other unbeliever shall venture to visit L’hasa he shall not be suffered to return alive.”

Colonel Stannard listened with respectful attention.

The relief from the harrowing uncertainty he had been enduring was inexpressibly grateful, and the terms of their release were so eminently reasonable that he need not hesitate an instant in accepting them unreservedly.

In simple, sincere language, therefore, he expressed the gratitude of himself and his companions to the Talé-lama for his clemency, and their entire willingness to give the pledges required.

The lama then withdrew, after stating that he would return before long, and the captives were left free to indulge in demonstrations of joy at their reprieve.

"The Talé-lama is a trump after all," cried Kent exuberantly, "and I'd just like to shake hands with him and tell him what I think of him."

"You're not likely to have the chance of doing that," said his father, whose usually grave countenance was now wonderfully lit up. "We shall see nothing more of him; but I'm very glad we were brought face to face with him, for we are undoubtedly the first Europeans that have ever seen him or heard him speak, so that our enterprise has succeeded beyond my highest expectations."

In the course of the afternoon the lama came back to inform them that they must be ready to start early the following morning, and that a guard of soldiers would be furnished them by whom they would be escorted as far as the Tibetan frontier.

Colonel Stannard expressed his high appreciation of this signal honour, which, however, he shrewdly

suspected was rather more of a precaution than a privilege, and then inquired as to the way by which they were to return.

Had it not been winter time he would have liked to take the route leading into India, but that was out of the question, the Himalayan mountain range being utterly impassable. To retrace the tedious and at times dangerous journey they had made was not to be desired, and so the colonel asked if they might not be sent through Tsiamdo, which lay almost due east, and so on to the frontiers of China, whence they could make their own way to the Yang-tse-Kiang River, which would carry them down to Shanghai.

After some consideration the lama said that there was no objection to this, and accordingly the matter was settled to the colonel's satisfaction.

The lama then took his leave, evidently quite well pleased at this harmonious conclusion of the business.

"All's well that ends well, Kent," said Colonel Stannard, when he had gone. "Providence has been kinder to us, perhaps, than we deserved. We have achieved our object as fully as we could desire, and now we shall go home by another route, thus completing our exploration of the country."

"Do you think L'hasa is worth all the trouble it takes to get here?" Kent asked with a saucy smile. "I'm sure I don't. Leaving out the Talé-lama's palace, with its golden dome, and those odd little houses built of horns, there's nothing very remarkable about the place. It has no walls nor towers. The people are not much different from those of other

cities we've been in. The trees are very fine, of course. But take it all in all, it's quite an ordinary city, and for the life of me I can't imagine why the Tibetans think it so sacred, and are so anxious to keep foreigners from visiting it."

"I think I understand it now, my boy," answered his father. "They are afraid of their country being annexed by England or Russia, and they imagine that this cannot take place so long as they keep the foreigners out of it. Well, we shall see. They cannot keep the door closed indefinitely. They will have to open it some time."

Bright and early the following morning they were all astir, and after a hearty breakfast set about preparations for a start.

In the courtyard below they found their own horses and pack animals ready for them, and in the street half a score of armed horsemen with their equipment were in waiting. Several of the lamas came to see them off, and they had a pleasant chat with them while the baggage was being loaded by the drivers, of whom a sufficient number had been hired who would go with them as far as the Chinese border.

Then, everything being in readiness, they bade good-bye to the lamas and to L'hasa, and set out on their long journey to the remote sea-coast.

What adventures and accidents they met with on the way, how many narrow escapes they had from falling into appalling chasms, or being overwhelmed by awful avalanches, what strange people they encountered, and what privations they endured, the

tremendous mountain ranges they crossed, and the desolate steppes they traversed—to recount it all in detail would require another volume.

The days were so full of exhausting toil that the nights scarcely sufficed for rest, and again and again the caravan had to halt to recruit the energies of both men and beasts. Horses, donkeys, camels, oxen, and yaks were variously employed in carrying the baggage, and Colonel Stannard had much trouble with them and their semi-barbarous drivers. But at last, after many weeks of heroic patience and persistence, they reached the great Yang-tse-Kiang River at a point where it was possible to hire boats in which to descend to the ocean.

At this point their tribulations practically ended, for although the boatmen needed constant looking after, and river pirates were to be guarded against, the passage down the mighty stream in the balmy spring weather was, upon the whole, a very pleasant experience, and they reached Shanghai without a mishap of any account.

Here Tokoura left them, having been remunerated for his services even beyond his expectations, and they took the next steamer for Calcutta, where the account of what they had accomplished was at first received with some scepticism, but soon accepted with general applause.

Colonel Stannard and Kent were the heroes of the hour. So too were Champ and Bunty in their own social spheres, and if Hercules did not hold his magnificent head a little higher when he condescended

to mingle in canine circles, it was only because his bearing was already as lofty as was possible.

The journey to L'hasa determined Kent's future career. Only the life of an explorer could now content him, and to fitting himself for that by study and training he thenceforth devoted his time and talents.

THE END

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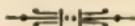
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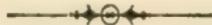
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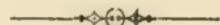
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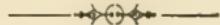
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